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New Writings in SF 30

Edited by Kenneth Bulmer

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NEW WRITINGS IN SF 30

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FOREWORD

by

KENNETH BULMER

THERE are many writers of science fiction and there are many imagined futures. It might be thought that for each writer there would be a different future, or set of futures, and to a large extent this is true. But there are at least two areas in which the totality of possible futures is limited. The first and most obvious is to be found in those stories which deliberately share similar, or almost-similar, backgrounds because the writers have peered into their crystal balls and deduced from current trends what is likely to happen—and one must at all times stress the ‘likely’—and so extrapolate futures that are consonant one with another.

Often writers consciously share futures. Once a ‘fact’ of the future has been discerned and described in print, other writers will use that as a part of their own postulated backgrounds. Because of the particular nature of SF, wherein thought and notion stimulate fresh thoughts and notions, this accretion of literary ‘facts’ about the future is hardly plagiarism.

The habit has its dangers. There was recently an outcry against the use of faster than light space travel, a useful device necessary to allow characters to move from solar system to solar system in their own lifetimes without

generation ships, frozen-travel, matter transmission, so as to continue a lifestyle within the framework of the story. This outcry has largely died down. It has been seen that FTL is a necessary device, and although there are still those who query the need to take a cast of characters away to another planet, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, provided that FTL is seen in its true light.

There are many other generally accepted facets of the various futures—call them what you will, furniture, shorthand, lack of imaginative power—and one of their main functions is to allow us to read a story for its meaning, uncluttered by repetitive descriptions of, for example, how a professor or a government-funded team solved the FTL problem in every story requiring its use. Readers of *New Writings in SF* will be familiar with many of these devices which, used intelligently, lend colour and pace and future-authenticity to stories.

But that brings us to the second area of futures that are similar. Very many stories cross my desk in the compilation of each successive volume of *NW in SF* and a vast number of them contain rehashes of what has been done before. There is a gulf set between the writer who uses SF conventional devices in order to speed his story along and clothe in familiar—to SF readers—concepts the fresh new things he has to say, and the writer who merely uses the same ideas without understanding them, thereby draining all life from them.

For one of his strands in 'And the Moon Says Goodnight' Martin Ricketts employs a story idea that has been often used, and yet, because of the sheer impossibility of knowing for sure that this could not happen tomorrow, it remains a genuine area for speculation. But it is in the handling of the story and the emotions and reactions of his characters that Martin Ricketts shows the tendency of modern SF. This prompts me to reflect that it would be interesting to hear

from readers with their own ideas on how the posed problem might be solved. No prizes; but a signed copy of the book might wind up by transmat in the library of the sender of the most ingenious solution.

Keith Roberts shows us a future that many people will vehemently deny could happen; but just because a future is not likely to occur it does not mean it is not possible, and from it we must take the philosophy along with the enjoyment and mental stimulation. Ian Watson presents us with the poignant results of a future cataclysm and E. C. Tubb the unsettling effects of library browsing on an alien planet.

The reviews of NWinSF appearing in the national and local press and elsewhere usually select particular stories for praise and the collections as a whole are uniformly welcomed. Occasionally one story or another will attract censure from one reviewer or another, for you cannot please all of the people all of the time. Of his story in this volume, Chris Morgan says: 'I know I'm steering a tricky course between subtlety and obscurity.' It will be interesting to see how Chris Morgan's fellow reviewers receive his work.

It is always pleasant to welcome a new writer to these pages, and Marie Jakober, who lives in Canada, makes her debut with 'Notes from the Android Underground' using the theme of repression generating fresh impetus. Marcus Porcius Cato used to repeat *delenda est Carthago*, and, in the salt-laden furrows, Carthage was most certainly deleted. But it is apparent that the idea, the memory, the psychological impact of Carthage did not die, as Rome found out. Those old Romans would in all probability have found the idea of beautiful female androids far more easy to accept than do today's unfortunate non-SF readers. The frame of mind would have been assimilated with Homeric poems.

Brian W. Aldiss presents an intriguing story which, I gather, was written while luxuriating on the lawn in blazing sunshine, or with waterproof pen and paper while

swimming. The last story in the volume continues Ritchie Smith's extravagant vision of a future that shares much of the colourful, impassioned, nostalgic future-viewpoints with his and Thomas Penman's earlier stories for *New Writings*.

Of these eight challenging brand-new stories, every one—with the exception of Chris Morgan's—centres around the examination of a particular future and of people's reactions to that future. Each future is distinct and the product of a different imagination, and each story challenges our reactions and assumptions. If any theme is to be discerned in *New Writings in SF 30*, it surely must be that of providing a handbook to the as yet uncharted futures that lie ahead of us all.

KENNETH BULMER

THE SHACK AT GREAT CROSS HALT

by

KEITH ROBERTS

Many and varied are the futures culled from the fertile imaginations of science-fiction writers. As each writer portrays his own particular vision of the many-faceted future it is often possible to trace back to the initial impetus that set the imagination racing, and to see where the concerns of the writer found expression in his own idiosyncratic way. Not everyone will agree with every author—the world would shudder to a halt in its orbit should that occur—and the discerning reader is at liberty to pick over the bones of a writer's statements and manipulation of events. But beware. The work is not the writer, as the writer is not the work. As for the Rural and the American Visitor—they discovered that their particular horrific future was founded on sand.

THE SHACK AT GREAT CROSS HALT

THERE WAS a big streak of lightning, bright as silver. Then the growly thing in the sky came closer very quickly, and barked once like a dog on the roof of the shack. The Rural heard the scutter of its claws; and at this point she woke up.

She had been dreaming; though it is by no means certain that the concept was known to her. She was very afraid. She lay still, eyes tightly closed, feeling the claws prick the air all round about; but the bark did not come again.

She opened her eyes, cautiously. Morning light was seeping through the one window the shack possessed. The light was greenish as yet, and dull. She turned her head, with equal slowness. Through the tilted panes she saw the Convolvulus King watching her, with the first white eyes of summer.

She lay a while longer, but the place remained silent; no creak, no tick of timber, scuff of a footfall. Her notion of silence took no account of the roar from the embankment against which the shack was built. That was a part of her life, and accepted. It had always been there, like the noise of blood in her ears.

She sat up, pulling her legs from the tangle of blankets. It had rained in the night; a puddle had collected, on the stamped earth floor beneath the window. She padded round it, knelt to press her face to the glass. The window

itself hung askew; a pane was broken, and the once-white paint was peeling from the frame in thick flakes. It was her pleasure occasionally to pick them away, like little scabs. She ran her fingers along the frame edge, smearing the droplets and spatters, bent to lick. The moisture had an old, white taste. The eyes of the King, she saw, were not yet fully open; they showed like pointed slits, or the glint beneath the lid before the lashes part. The morning sun would open them, in trumpet glory.

She unfastened the door. The damp had swelled the woodwork, so that it grated and scraped. She tugged till it gave, stepped outside. She knelt a moment by the King's great bole. Near him she felt safe, though she couldn't span his body by a quarter. His gnarled arms extended over the shack, protectingly; and his ragged head looked kind. Next to him the Ivy Queen reared her rough brickwork in the brightening mist. One of her eyes was very large, the other small. She watched summer and winter alike; but she was more aloof. The King's awakening meant that warmth had come again. She looked round for his morning gift; and the thunder-noise was explained, for it lay squarely on the iron roof of the shack. One side of the brown carton was split, showing the bright gleam of cans. She scrambled for it and pulled it down, thrust it and its contents in through the shack door.

Other cans had scattered across the rough slope of the embankment. She climbed for them, clutching them to her chest in twos and threes, sliding back, feeling the harsh grass scrape her under her nightie. The last cans lay high up on the slope; she climbed for them as well, sat gripping them and glaring down. Other shacks sprawled along the embankment foot, leaning each to the next; shacks made of tar paper and asbestos, shacks made of timber barks and canvas, shacks made of packing crates and old tyre stacks. Smoke was rising from one improvised chimney; but there

were as yet no other signs of life.

None of the other dwellings was very close to hers; the *Convolvulus* King kept the rest of the Rurals at bay. She stared down at him, at his wide-stretched arms. Behind him a canal curved off through empty, overgrown meadows. Duckweed coated it, making it a brighter green track through grass; but where it passed beneath the embankment the water showed tarry black.

She climbed farther, hotching herself on the wiry grass, still clutching the last of the tins. Finally she reached the barrier, with its black and yellow tiger-stripes. She clung one-handed to a support, watching the wheels of the jugs as they roared a few feet from her head. The high bank shook to their passing; but to her they were objects of indifference, neither friendly nor dangerous. There had perhaps been a time when she had felt otherwise; but she had forgotten.

The metal of the stay was rusty, she could feel the sharp little flakes digging into her palm. Also despite the impotence of the monsters at her back she didn't feel wholly secure. It wasn't good to be this high on the bank; it made her feel defenceless, over-exposed. She stayed where she was none the less, in hope of further gifts; but for the moment none came.

To her right, built out over the water on a high shelf of concrete, was a deserted Little Chef Grill. She could see its sign, the cheerful white-coated man with his tall white hat, weather-stained now and peeling; and another sign, its front marked with rust, that showed knives and forks and cups on a blue ground. From this height she could see across the littered forecourt; but nothing moved there, and none of the jugs seemed to stop any more. She stared back down at the canal. Roadway and waterway met like a great cross; the one silent, the other endlessly roaring.

The sun was brightening now, piercing the mist. She slid

back the way she had come, closer to the protection of the Convolvulus King. She used the canal, wiping herself with a handful of grass, and finished her morning obeisance; though that too was a conceit she probably didn't own. She touched the Ivy Queen's mantle of star-shaped leaves, scurried behind the shack to kneel for a moment by the Place of the Blue Monkey. The Place itself was marked by a pile of water-worn stones, lugged from the canal bank for the purpose. She touched it, as she had touched the King and Queen, bent to sniff the damp scents of earth and moss. A close sound startled her then, a tap; she leaped round glaring and quivering, but once more there was nothing.

She returned to the shack, closing the door and wedging the wooden latch. She took down two tins; one from the new gift, one from her store cupboard, choosing them for the differing patterns on their labels. She understood the use of tin openers well enough, and her fingers were deft. She scooped up beans and fish, delicately avoiding the jagged metal edges. The fish she ate carefully, splitting each with her nails to extract the limp, parboiled backbone. She wiped her chin with her fingers, then her fingers on the hem of the nightie. She lay back on the bed, pulling the blankets loosely across her. It was her custom to sleep through the forenoon, foraging again at midday and once more after dusk.

Constant forays were essential, for the gifts were less frequent now than previously. Whole days passed without the familiar thud and crash of an arriving crate, once an entire week; and the inhabitants of the other shacks, normally never seen, had taken to prowling and eyeing each other suspiciously, their knives at the ready. Though even then they had not troubled her overmuch; the protection of the Convolvulus King was powerful, few stepped willingly into his shadow.

She turned on the bed, snuggling into the sour clothes. Perhaps the good times would come back too now the King was awake again. There had been one good time in particular, seasons ago now; she remembered the rending thunder from the embankment that had heralded it, the terror with which she had seen the Jug veer against the barrier to lean wheels spinning, threatening to topple and crash. The side of the great lorry had split; from it, in bulky showers, flew the tins and preserves, the cling peaches and *ratatouille*, the butter beans and marrowfat peas, the Scottish raspberries and minced stewed steak, the tuna fillets and Canadian salmon, the lychees and selected prawns, the pastes and patés, the cream soups and pilchards and corned beefs and consommés of a lifetime's dream. Norwegian sild rained in dangerous hail; the jams of Paradise, Tiptrees' Little Scarlet, Robinsons' Best Chunky, splashed like magnetic bombs while fumes belched from the wildly-running diesel and a bawling man ran fingerless, trying to stub his hand out on plastic-bright upholstery. The Rurals scuttled, forward and back across the great slope of the bank, groaning and sweating under their loads. By night-fall, when they were driven off with noise and lights, the Jug was empty; but every shack was full from floor to roof.

She smiled, full herself now, remembering. Flies buzzed, soothing, on the midden outside the window; to her mind they sounded as loud as the noise of the Jugs. Her eyes slid closed; she thought for a time she might pleasure herself, but her fingers were sleepy too. Her chest rose and fell, steadily; then, in an instant, she was bolt-awake. The sound that had troubled her had come again; and this time there was no doubt. Something was scrambling at the latch of the door!

She was out of the blankets in a flash, scrinching herself up in the far corner of the bunk. Her knife was in her hand. It was a good knife, long and jagged and sharp. She had

used it, more than once; but would it serve against a Thunder-thing?

The *Convolvulus* King watched through the window, with more of his white trumpet-eyes. The noise came again, and a voice calling. She pulled her lips back from her teeth. The bar of the doorcatch joggled impatiently; and the wooden wedge fell away. The door grated inward, letting in sunlight and warmth.

The Thunder-thing was tall, taller by half a head than the Rural, and her eyes were terrible. Round her face as she stood was a moving blaze of yellow; and there was something else. A blueness, blue as the sky, as kingfisher feathers, as sparks. The Rural licked her mouth. She thought she had never seen so bright a colour. She gripped the knife; and her heart pounded, as if about to burst out from her chest.

The newcomer advanced, it seemed uncertainly, screwing her eyes against the gloom of the little cabin. Then she froze. She said softly, 'Oh, my God ...'

She glanced behind her, pushed the door to slightly. She said, 'I thought the place was empty. Why didn't you answer me?'

She took another half pace forward. The knifeblade shook a little; and she stopped again. She seemed to sense an almost-physical barrier, a vital space that would be encroached at her peril. Another step, another six inches, and the Rural would attack. She put her hands out, slowly, eyes on the blade. She said, 'I ain't going to hurt you. See, I don't have anything. I don't want to hurt you. Can you understand?'

The Rural shifted her position fractionally. The other stared at her, eyes narrowed. She said, 'Can you speak? Do you know what I'm saying?'

There was no response; and the stranger sighed. She

moved back, with equal caution, till she felt the doorpost behind her. She squatted slowly, then sat. She said, 'I guess we're in for kind of a long session, honey. Because I ain't going no place. And you ain't going to get no place, not by the looks of you. Not for a long, long while.'

She produced a pack of cigarettes, lit up carefully and extinguished the match. She leaned her head against the doorframe and blew smoke. 'Fact is,' she said, 'I'm in a kind of a fix. I've gotta get out of sight for a time, maybe a good time; and there ain't nowhere better than here. So we'd best get working on some kind of relationship, huh?'

The other made no response; and she sighed again. She said, 'Are you a deafy? Or are you just plain crazy? Do you understand what I'm saying? If you do, nod your head.'

Nothing.

'Do you live here on your own? What's your name?'

Nothing.

'I guess I forgot,' said the newcomer. 'Names don't rate much with you folk, do they? Maybe you never even had one.' She smiled. She said, 'I've got a name. All my very own. But maybe that don't matter neither.' She paused. 'I'm from America,' she said. 'That's one heck of a long way off. You ever heard of America?'

No reply.

She blew smoke again, carefully. 'Well,' she said, 'We're going to have to try something out. This is the way it's goin' to work. There was an old guy once, back in my home town, found a year-old pup wired up to a tree, way out in the woods. Alsatian pup, she was. She was close on dead; and boy, had she been treated rough. And you know what he did? The old guy? He got her in a van, first off. And fed her in there, two, maybe three weeks. On account of he couldn't get near. So what he done instead was sit and talk. Just talk, like I'm talking to you. Nice and easy. And you

know what? In the end that pup got to be one of the nicest damn dogs you ever could meet. Just by talking. That's what I'm goin' to try with you. Because honey, I've got all the time in the world as well ...'

The sun was higher now, beating on the tin roof, and the temperature in the little shack had increased. The Rural felt her eyelids droop. There was something in the Thunder-thing's voice, something calm and sleepy ... The knife-point dropped; and she shook herself awake again, with a little jump. But the strange personage had not moved. 'No way, honey,' she said. 'Not just yet awhile, at least. You might not be all that smart; but I guess you're pretty quick with that thing. You just go on fighting me your way, huh? And I'll tell you all about the old man's dog. The dog he rescued. She had a name too. Do you want to know what it was?'

The voice went on and on, tinkling and chuckling, like water over stones. The words made sense, a sort of sense. They reminded her of things she had forgotten. The brook, now. Surely she had not always lived here. There had been a house by a brook, a house with a garden of flowers. At the bottom of the garden a wooden bridge on which you could lean, see the great shadows of fish in the green water below. Cool green, gliding green, set with weed banks that waved and waved in the current, forward and back, like flags. While the sun-sparkle on the water danced too, made little bright skeins of reflection that moved forward and back, forward and back ...

Her eyes had quite closed that time. She jerked them open, with a little harsh cry of alarm; but the other still sat by the doorpost, a fair-haired young woman in a bright anorak, her hair tied back behind her ears like the tail of a horse. She didn't somehow seem quite so frightening now. Perhaps ... perhaps she wasn't the Thunder-thing after all.

But she had come with the thunder, so she must be. The Rural stared through the window, begging mutely for help; but the *Convolvulus King* still reared his great head outside, his eyes still watched white and calm.

'It's gettin' to you, honey,' said the American girl. 'It's gettin' to you. You know something? Sure as God made little apples, I'm going to win. All I got to do is wait. You don't know what to do, do you? You poor little mixed-up hitch ...'

The voice went on again, losing none of its gentle calm. 'Now I'm gonna tell you about yourself,' it said. 'You know what you look like? You're a mess, honey. You are the biggest Goddam mess I ever saw. And take it from me, I've seen a few. If you ain't crawling, I'm to be vastly surprised. Come to that, if I ain't crawling as well before too very long I'm goin' to be equally taken ahack. Jeeze, this place stinks ...' She lit another cigarette, very slowly and deliberately. 'If you was to look in a mirror,' she said, 'you would scare your little self one-half to death. Only maybe you ain't ever seen a mirror. Maybe you don't know what that is either.'

She added the match to the small pile by her feet. The eyes of the Rural followed the movement of her hand, returned to her face. 'No mirrors,' she said. 'And no America. How the other half does truly live ... I bet you never smoked a cigarette either. I bet you don't even know what they are.' She took the pack from the pocket of her jacket, held it out. The other's expression didn't change. The American girl shrugged and put the packet away again. She said, 'Maybe you're the smart one ...' She blew smoke. 'Well,' she said, 'the day's wastin'. And we ain't no farther forward. On the other hand, we ain't slipped back none ...'

The notions of 'morning' and 'afternoon' were alike alien to the Rural; but she was acutely sensitive to sun angle. She snatched a hasty glance at the window; turned

quickly to stare up at the back wall of the shack. The American girl brushed back a straying wisp of hair. 'What's the matter?' she said softly. 'You expectin' visitors? Or is it food parcel time again?'

No answer; and she shook her head. 'Maybe you're gettin' hungry,' she said. 'Or do you want a drink? What do you drink, anyway? Not that filth outa the canal, for Chrissake ... Where's your water?'

Something connected, in the Rural's brain. Not words, but the shape the words made. A little husky sound escaped from her; and the American followed the quick turn of her head. She saw, for the first time, the lagged standpipe that protruded from a clutter of rubbish in the corner of the shack; the old brass tap, the pans and rusty kettle that stood nearby. She smiled, broadly. 'Honey,' she said, 'you know what we just done? We communicated. Now I call that real progress ...' She repeated the word, quietly and deliberately; again, the Rural's eyes moved to the tap.

'I got you wrong,' said the American. 'You ain't dumb at all. You're real smart. Now, what you going to do? You want a drink, you just go right ahead. Go on, don't mind me. Get yourself a drink.'

The Rural did not move.

'Then,' said the American, 'I guess this is where we try something different. Take the process a stage farther on.' She stubbed the cigarette she had been smoking, and uncrossed her legs. Instantly, the Rural tensed. 'Now don't you go fussin' none,' she said. 'I'm goin' to get a drink for you, is all. Nice and easy, nice and slow. Don't you go panicking now. You just watch ...'

She stood up, by degrees, moved slowly across the shack. 'You got three choices,' she said. 'You can stay right there, which I hope you'll do; you can make a break for it; or you

can come for me with that pigsticker of yours, which I profoundly do not wish ...' She filled a saucepan from the tap, back half-turned but watching from the tail of her eye. The Rural didn't move.

'Attagirl,' said the American. 'That's the way now. Nice and easy. Ain't nobody goin' to hurt you. Not for a little water ... Now, I'm comin' back. I'm goin' to sit me down, just like before. See? You ain't scared of me now, are you? Not any more ...'

She rested against the doorframe, and considered. 'Problem the second,' she said, 'is making the handover. Because I am not, repeat not, going to put myself inside your reach. Not yet awhile. I guess that'd set us back right to square one. So what I propose ...' She reached, almost in slow motion, for a thin wooden pole, some four feet long, that lay on the hut floor. It looked as if at one time it might have been a curtain rod. 'What I propose,' she said, 'is the coward's way out. That way I managed to live to my present healthy age.'

Very slowly, she began pushing the saucepan of water towards the hunk. 'According to the book,' she said, 'this shouldn't scare you none. You got a critical distance, ain't you? Well, what's coming inside it is your own saucepan. And you know what water is, don't you? Water don't hurt ...'

The pan lay within the Rural's reach. She tensed, trembling; relaxed again slowly as the stick was withdrawn. 'Attagirl,' said the American once more. 'Tell you what. Next time, you just come straight out and say you're havin' gas. OK?' She laid the pole down. She said, 'Well, go on, honey. There's your drink.'

The Rural stayed huddled; and the other sighed. 'Well,' she said, 'I guess we can't win 'em all ...'

Something bounced and crashed down the embankment a few yards from the shack. The Rural's head jerked round

sharply, then back to the American's face. 'Well, how about that?' she said, intrigued. 'Honey, this becomes more and more encouragin'. Because whatever you are or are not, you are not deaf ...'

The Rural was exhibiting strong anxiety symptoms. Her eyes flickered rapidly, from the stranger's face to the window and back.

'I wonder what's eatin' you now,' said the American girl. 'Let's just try and work it out. Your food parcel's come, ain't it? Like you knew it would. Somebody up there looks after you real good. And you want it bad. 'Cause if you don't get out there pitching, one of your little hairy pals along the way is goin' to get there first. Only you can't get out there. Because there's no way past me. You can't work me out at all, can you? There's just no way.'

She uncoiled herself again, gradually. 'I am gettin' mighty stiff,' she observed. 'You have got very much the best part of this deal.' She strolled from the hut, stooped to the crate, hefted it and returned. 'Problem solved,' she said. Then she grinned. The Rural, apparently, had not moved; but the handle of the saucepan was turned round the opposite way. 'That is my girl,' she said. 'Honey, you're comin' along just fine. Just like that puppy dog I told you about ...'

She crossed the shack, set the battered cardboard container down. 'I am going to start turning my back on you just a little more,' she said. 'Which may, or may not, be a capital error.' She found the can opener, used it and returned with a faint groan to her place by the door. 'Pork and beans,' she said with a grimace. 'Ain't you just the lucky one ...' Once more, the pole was brought into use; the opened can inched across the floor to stand finally beside the saucepan. 'From the looks of you that's how you generally eat,' said the American girl. 'So I don't have to tell you to mind your fingers ...'

The Rural stared at the open can, and back to the door. The problem was baffling, insoluble. The light of the long day was fading; and the stranger still barred the way, still held her prisoner. She had decided, almost certainly now, that she was not the Thunder-thing; the Thunder-thing had claws, not a soothing voice with brook-water in it. Also—and again a far memory stirred—she had given her drink, and food. Her mind grappled with the concept of giving. Surely there had been someone else, long ago, who had given such things to her. Someone warm . . .

She found herself stirred by wholly-forgotten emotions. She moistened her lips, stared from the food to the stranger's face, the dark looming of the *Convolvulus* King beyond. She knuckled her eyes and nose. Her mind made shapes; strange bright little shapes, that refused to join into a pattern. A picture came, of the stranger sleeping, herself creeping forward with a knife; and she frowned. Somehow she didn't want to stick it into her. All the blood would come then, and the voice would stop. She knuckled her eyes again, harder than before, wiped her nose with the back of her arm. Yet she couldn't eat, not with the stranger watching. She stared at the bean-can again, at the doorway, the great shape beyond, and didn't know what to do.

The daylight faded, finally. The eyes of the *Convolvulus* King turned to darker and darker spots of blue that glimmered and went out. In the dark, she reached stealthily for the can. Then she froze. There were strange sounds; shufflings, and a scrape. A light flared, became steady. She stared at the little flame, fascinated.

'It's a nightlight, honey,' said the gentle voice. 'Just a little candle. You seen one before, you must have. You just relax now, it ain't going to hurt you none. And I'll tell you some more about the dog. I bet you ain't ever seen a dog . . .'

She listened to the voice, and to the crickets that chirped all round about, just as if nothing had happened. The Jugs

still passed, rumbling; but in ones and twos now, with spaces in between. It was as quiet as the bank ever got. In time the candle flame seemed to fade. The light reduced itself, flaring and spangling; bars grew across her vision and she passed, without transition, into dreaming.

The dreams were varied and rich. She saw the stream again and the bridge that crossed it, the tall plants that grew along its banks. Later there was the garden with its beds of flowers, yellow and orange and red, a house that seemed filled with sunlight. In the house was the Warm One; her mind shied away from giving her another name. She clung to her skirts, laughing, while the Warm One clattered dishes at a high stove, its top a shiny black. Grass grew on the floor of the room in which she stood, even on the table top. She liked the grass; she wished it would grow up round the stove and coat it, make it spring with flowers. She stared up; and the grass had indeed spread, coating the dish rack with shaggy green. Worms dropped from it to wriggle among the burners, warming their pink skins by the thin blue flames. She laughed at them; then suddenly she became afraid. She began to scream; but more came, and more. They poured from the stove top; and she arched her body, fighting to get away. Hotness jetted from her; before she woke she knew she had wetted the bed. She screamed that she was sorry, she hadn't meant it; and the Warm One came to scoop her into her arms, stroke her hair and laugh. 'It doesn't matter, Baby,' she said. 'It's all right, it doesn't matter ...'

She opened her eyes. The mattress was soaked and nasty. She sat up, staring round. Her fingers twitched; but the big knife had gone.

The American girl smiled at her. 'I put it away for you,' she said. 'Which was just as well. Honey, you sure have had some night ...'

She rubbed her face. There was the stove, just like in the dream, blue flames hissing under sizzling pans. But no grass grew round it. Instead a rich smell was in the shack. The American girl began scooping food on to shiny round plates. 'I done my best with the fritters,' she said, 'but your stock-pile don't give a sight of choice. These are mushrooms, honey. There's millions, up by the old steak house. Don't you ever pick 'em? I've known folk go a hundred miles, for a fresh field mushroom ...' She walked across with a plate, set it down by the bed. The Rural huddled away; but the scent was overpowering. She grabbed, suddenly, cramming her mouth with the strange hot food; then she stopped. The American girl had seated herself cross-legged on a packing crate, a plate on her knee. Above the plate, regularly, moved a little bright stick. She watched it, fascinated; and the other paused. She said, 'What's the matter now, honey? What's wrong?'

Almost it was as if the dream switched back on. She held her hand out, mewling; and the Warm One laughed. She said, 'Sure you can, Babba. Look, Jack, look at that. She wants to be a grown-up girl ...'

She blinked; and the American was standing staring quizzically down. She said, 'You want to eat with a fork? OK, honey, you go right ahead. Here ...' She held her arm out. The Rural pressed back against the wall; and she laughed. 'Oh, no. You want it, you take it from me. Come on. I ain't going to bite ...'

The shiny stick poised tantalisingly in the air. She stared, at it and the plate; and her fingers went out and snatched. The American girl watched, fascinated. She said, 'Honey, I just can't figure you out ...'

The thing was awkward at first; the food skidded away, the plate all but overturned. Then it was as if an old, forgotten skill came from somewhere. She broke the food with the side of the tines, pressed with the points. A morsel came

up, on the fork; and she transferred it to her mouth. She ate steadily, her eyes on the other's face, till the plate was cleared.

The American watched closely, head on one side. She said, 'Are you just copyin'? Or ...' She shrugged. 'Anyways, it don't make no odds. As my old Prof used to say, "Build on what you've achieved ..."' Very deliberately, she took a cloth from her pocket, damped it with a little water and wiped her mouth and chin. Then she walked forward, keeping a wary eye on the fork still gripped in the other's fist, laid the cloth on the bunk edge. She turned her back, busying herself with the breakfast things; but she knew that, clumsily, the Rural followed suit.

The American poured water from a kettle into a bowl. 'What we could use,' she said, 'is a little soap. You got any soap?' She peered at the great mound of boxes and cartons that filled the back of the little place to head height. 'What you got in there? Soap, I wouldn't wonder. You just store anythin', don't you? Anythin' that rolls down. Like the butane cylinders. You didn't know what they were. But you fetched 'em in anyways.' She stacked the dishes beside the little stove. 'You got any clothes here?' she said. 'That thing you're wearin' ain't fit to be seen. What's left of it. Started out white, I shouldn't wonder. Come to that, so did you ...'

She put her hands on her hips, surveyed the tiny place critically. 'You know,' she said, 'This could be OK. Needs a scrub-out with carbolic, ain't nothin' else going to save it. But they pay for fishin' shacks smaller'n this in the States. Needs a hammer, some nails, fix up that window ... We'd be like bugs in a rug. Or maybe that is an unfortunate choice of phrase ...'

She started hauling at the crates and bales, lifting them down, peering inside, setting them behind her in a growing stack against the wall. The Rural watched, baffled, from her bunk. 'I guess you're wondering about me,' said the Ameri-

can girl. 'Well, sometimes I get to wondering about myself. I'll tell you somethin' now, for a start. I could have killed you yesterday, straight off. No bother, no fuss. Splat, just like that. 'Stead of talkin' myself hoarse all day, losing most of a night's sleep. Wanna know why I didn't? You don't? Well, you're goin' to anyways.' She yipped. She said, 'Well Goddam. Cigarettes. Gauloise too. How the hell'd you come by them ...' She tore a packet open, felt for her matches. 'I guess they'll burn like horse droppin's,' she said laconically. 'But a smoke's a smoke ...' She inhaled, critically, blew through her nostrils and shrugged. She said, 'Well, I tasted worse ...' She laid the cigarette down, and went on with her task. 'Quick killin's a lot better'n what *they* do,' she said. She nodded in the direction of the invisible but ever-audible embankment. 'But I guess I just don't have a taste for it. Leastways, not till I have to. Like the old guy and the dog. You know, I ain't got a sight of brains; and I don't go for no God-talk and such. But hell, there's you sittin' up and takin' notice, 'stead of layin' out there stiff as a board, it's like you come back to life. And we ain't finished yet, we ain't half-started ...'

She took another drag on the cigarette, and narrowed her eyes. 'You know,' she said, 'sometimes I get to thinkin'. And you know what it's like? It's like everything we do, every little thing, all gets itself wrote down somewhere. First to last, right through. Don't matter none, ain't nobody goin' to do anythin' about it. Ain't nobody there to do anythin'. But it's all there, just the same. And we can't none of us call it back. So if I can win somethin', anythin'; even a little thing, something like you ... well, that goes on the record as well. Sort of an eternal good act. It'll still be there, come the next million years. Even though it don't matter.' She glanced across at the Rural. 'That make any sense to you? No? Well, I guess that's OK too. It don't make sense to me, most of the time ...'

She wrenched up a box lid, began setting cans of meat and vegetables out beside the stove. 'I guess I talk too much anyways,' she said. 'Always was my trouble. Only you ain't got no option but to listen ...' She stubbed the cigarette. 'It's sort of like a philosophy I guess,' she said. 'Shoulda done more of it at school. Saved myself a whole piece of headwork later on. You know what a guy told me once? It was this idea I'd got, worked it out all for myself, about nobody ever really belongin' to anybody else. You know, marryin' and all that bein' a phoney. And you know what he said? "That's Plato," he said. "That's straight outa the Republic ..." "Well Goddam," I said, "there just ain't nothin' new" ...' She turned the cans, approvingly. 'These need usin',' she said. 'They're gettin' all rusty. Honey, for lunch we are going to have one hell of a stew ...'

She turned back to her task. 'Tried once on a time studyin' Zen,' she said. 'You know about Zen? The sound of one hand clappin', all that stuff? But I guess you never came across that. It ain't in your line ...' She stopped what she was doing then, to stare at the Rural; and quite suddenly her eyes moistened and softened. 'How the hell should I know?' she whispered. 'Maybe that's all you hear. All day, and all night too ...'

She shook herself briskly, took down another box. 'And that's what comes of philosophisin',' she said. 'End up scarin' your own pants off. What the hell ...' She drew from the box a tall, brightly coloured can. She held it up, and began to laugh. 'Aerosols,' she said. 'What in tarnation did you make of *them*?' She fizzed, experimentally. 'What shall we have?' she said. 'Forest Flowers, or Summer Fragrance? Maybe even a breath of Pine ...' She squirted round her in a vigorous arc. 'Take more'n that,' she said. 'All that's doin' is addin' *harmonics*. But I guess we can put it down as a gesture ...'

By the time she called a halt the end of the little place was piled high with crates; and the Rural, intrigued, was no longer cringing by the wall. She was kneeling on the bunk edge, intently following every move.

The American girl opened tins, slopped their contents into a saucepan and picked up a small round plastic tub. 'As I live and breathe,' she said. 'Garlic salt . . . Honey, I just rechristened this place. The Crossways Hilton. How's that? Sounds great, don't it . . .'

The Rural's nostrils widened at the scent from the saucepan. She gazed at it longingly. The stranger had turned her back. She gauged the distance from the bunk, tensing. A quick dash, that was all that was needed. Just a quick dash . . .

The American girl swung round at the cry of pain, dropping into an odd little half-crouch. The other was pressed to the wall, eyes wild. Her knuckles were to her mouth; in her other hand was a jagged-edged tin.

The American relaxed, slowly. 'Honey,' she said, 'that was neither friendly nor smart. I could find it in myself to be disappointed in you . . .'

She crossed the shack, slowly, squatted down in front of the Rural. She said, 'Give that thing here now, you don't need it. And let's see your hand . . .'

She was inside critical distance. The tin was raised, menacingly; and she extended her own hand, an inch at a time, palm flat. She said gently, 'You did it yourself. I didn't hurt you, was nothing to do with me. Stoves are hot, you know that now. Now come on, honey. Give it here. You ain't going to do anything with it. Just put it down . . .'

She reached for the tin, carefully. 'And this,' she said, 'is where I get carved but good. For which I shall have none but myself to blame . . .'

Her fingers touched the rim. She pulled, gently; and quite suddenly the Rural relinquished her grip. A strange

expression crossed her face; she pressed her other hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

The American let her held breath go. She said, 'That is a very, very good girl. Now come on, show me. Let's see ...'

Strange, to touch the Rural's fingers. They were warm, and unexpectedly soft. The American girl drew the hand down, slowly. She said, 'What, that bitty little mark? You been holdin' out on me honey, ain't nothing there at all.' She prolonged the contact, rubbing the grimy nails gently with her thumb. She said, 'You sure do set up a howl over nothin' ...'

She drew away, finally. It seemed the other relinquished the grip reluctantly. 'I guess,' she said, 'we crossed a real big hurdle there. You ain't scared no more now, are you? Not any more ...'

One of the valuables she had unearthed had been a small folding table. She set it up, placed a pair of crates beside it. 'Now,' she said, 'having got you off that stinking bunk, the aim's goin' to be to keep you off. That thing's goin' outside, but fast. You got enough blankets to make up a bed for the night. Least they'll be clean ...'

Once more, gently, she took the other's hand. The Rural pulled back, resisting; then it seemed she understood what was required of her. She scrambled to her place; and the American wielded a ladle, placed a steaming dish in front of her. 'Don't go burnin' yourself again,' she said. 'Now, this thing here's a spoon. It's OK, you got one your side too. You just watch what I do, you'll be OK ...'

The other ate rapidly, her eyes under the matted tangle of hair flicking forward and back to the American's face.

'I wonder how much you know?' said the American girl. 'Just who you *really* are ... I still reckon there's something phoney about you, honey. Because you catch on too fast. You didn't build this place for yourself though, that's for sure ...'

She pushed her own plate away, reached for cigarettes and matches. 'Do you know what happened to you?' she said. 'Do you know *anything* that happened? Dissolution of the Lords? Invitation to the TUC to send delegates to an Upper House? Eviction of foreign nationals, the Sterling Crash? The First Peoples' War?'

The other made no response; and she shrugged and blew smoke. 'Maybe that's just as well too,' she said. 'It's all in the history books, honey. Only they ain't been written yet ...'

The Rural showed no inclination to return to the bunk. Instead she squatted close to the American as she worked on the stores remaining to be sorted. Towards the back of the pile the objects tended to be bulkier. A small rusting refrigerator came to light, 'Which,' said the American girl, 'we decidedly do not need, not having paid our quarterlies for some time.' The floor of the shack was so cluttered now it was becoming difficult to move; the American hauled the thing to the door, impeded more than assisted by her new helpmate, tumbled it through. 'What we gotta do,' she said, 'is find a name for you, honey. Because I do not choose to use the one you've got ...' She stood back. 'You know how many Rurals they got in this country now?' she said. 'Folk like you? I tell you, you would be surprised. Only of course they ain't all like you. Some of 'em ... well, you wouldn't believe it. Met a Professor of Archeology once, great old guy. He was a Rural. Gettin' on real fine too. And there's a few Lords and Ladies too, waitin' for sardine cans to bounce down embankments. I even heard tell there was some real estate men out in the shanties. And artists, lawyers, a few doctors. Anybody whose face don't fit ...' She wiped her forehead with her arm. 'Still,' she said, 'they ain't all bad. All this stuff you got, you don't think it *falls* off the Jugs, do you? They know it goes on. Even the top brass. They just write it off ...' She spat. 'I guess in a way

though, that makes sense as well. It's cheaper than benefits; and you folk don't live too long as a rule.'

The Rural stared, eyes wide; and the other laughed and touched her shoulder. 'It's OK,' she said. 'Forgot the number one rule, didn't I? I ain't mad at you ...'

The clearing proceeded. The last object to emerge from the shambles was a dressing table. 'And with a mirror!' said the American girl. 'It's slid down, I guess I can reach ... Why'd you shove it back there, you screwball? Gimme a hand now, get it across by the window. Man, don't that look classy?'

She hauled a bulky carton into the light, then another. 'These ain't tinned stuff,' she said. She pulled up the flaps and whistled. 'Well,' she said, 'that just ain't true. What'd I call you now? A screwball? Well, you're a screwball two times over. Jeans you got here, dresses ... Best get 'em up on a line someplace, get the air through 'em. Hey, that's a cool little number. Wouldn't mind it myself ...' She whistled again, and started to laugh. 'You got an admirer up there, honey,' she said. 'Only you're too dumb to know it ...' She held out a fistful of flimsy brightness; the Rural reached for it, but she flicked it away. 'Not yet awhile, hon,' she said. 'First off, I'm introducin' you to a bathtub. You got one out back. I saw it yesterday when I was scoutin' round. Quite how we're gonna get you in it I ain't sure; but I'm beginnin' to get the glimmerings of an idea ...'

Finally she tackled the problem of the mattress. The Rural demurred at first; though later she seemed willing enough to help haul it through the door. 'Better get it round the back,' said the American girl grimly. 'We got flies enough already, no point attractin' more. No, not that way, you dope. Over here ...'

The Rural dropped the mattress abruptly, ran ahead. The American followed curiously. One of the *Convolvulus* King's great black arms swooped low over the shack; be-

neath it, the other was kneeling by a pile of water-worn stones. 'What's the matter, honey?' asked the American girl. 'What you found?'

The Rural turned. Her face was quite altered; and a big pebble was clutched in her fist.

'OK,' said the American. 'Now OK, it's all right. No need gettin' up tight, I ain't comin' no closer. Why you getting so upset?'

The other hissed between her teeth; and the American backed off. 'Have it your way,' she said. 'I ain't forcin' the issue. What is that thing there? Looks like a grave to me. You had a pet die or something? You buried it there?'

The Rural made no answer; and the American girl shrugged. She said, 'You got more hangups than I've had hot breakfasts in this lousy country. Come on, will you? No point startin' pitchin' rocks ...'

The Rural relaxed. She dropped the missile and followed meekly enough; but in front of the shack she ran to clasp the *Convolvulus* King's rough trunk. She stared up, pressing her face to the fresh green leaves; and the American stood hands on hips, shaking her head. 'Honey,' she said softly, 'this just plain ain't right. That thing ain't nothin'. Just an old dead tree, sort of morning glory climbin' round it. Broken-down barn next to it ...' She looked up in turn, and shivered faintly. 'Beats me how you can stand livin' under it anyway,' she said. 'It plain gives me the creeps ...'

The Rural turned a troubled face to her; and she reached to take her hand. 'Honey,' she said again, 'this just ain't right. That thing's bin dead a million years. Don't go back there, you don't belong. Not any more. That's where they want you to be.' She pulled, gently. She said, 'Come on ...'

Inside the shack she set a fresh kettle on the little stove. 'What we could use,' she said, 'is some good fresh vegetables. That old Prof I was tellin' you about, now he grew

great vegetables. Got a proper little yard laid out, all fenced round real neat. Used to trade his surplus off for baccy and liquor, reckoned he'd never had it so good. Some of 'em even started runnin' goats and cows. That's what we could use now. A goat and a cow. I bet you'd learn to look after them real fast. Don't you reckon?'

The Rural made a throaty, croaking little sound; and the other looked up sharply. She said, 'You know about them too? Goats and cows?'

To her amazement, the other nodded vigorously. The American girl narrowed her eyes. 'Well then, tell you what we'll do,' she said. 'When Johnny comes, we'll get you out of this. I ain't told you about Johnny yet; have I? And we'll find us a place, farm maybe, and we'll have all the goats and cows we want. Like Lenny and the rabbits. OK? You on?'

The Rural pushed at her hair, and slowly smiled.

'You know,' said the American girl, 'you could be sorta cute. But God, you stink ...'

After the makeshift meal she set to work restowing the bulk of the stores she had sorted. Evening was deepening again by the time she finished. She lit two candles, dragged the tin bath round from the side of the shack and set a pair of vast saucepans simmering on the stove. She took down a gaily-coloured plastic bottle and examined it critically. 'Pour one capful under running hot tap,' she said. 'Well, that's the first thing we ain't got. I guess we'll just have to get by without.' She poured water into the tub, began stirring briskly. 'Though why they bin sendin' down bubble baths,' she said, 'passes my understandin'. Unless it's that undeclared admirer of yours payin' court again ...'

The Rural drew nearer, intrigued. A towering bank of golden-white foam was making itself round the point where the American still splashed her fingers vigorously. She put a hand out, drew back; then, greatly daring, scooped some of

the iridescent bubbles on to her palm. She smeared it with her fingers, watching the bubbles spread and pop.

'That's my girl,' said the American softly. 'You're nosier'n a monkey, ain't you? Tell me what, give me a gourd an' a sugar lump and I'd catch you every time ...' She added more hot water, undressed quickly and stepped into the bath. 'Now you just watch real good,' she said. 'Take it all in, honey. Everythin' I do ...'

The Rural stared, fascinated. The other's hair gleamed in the soft light; foam clung to her; her red chest-berries bounced as she soaped herself vigorously. 'This is also,' she said, 'the first time in weeks I bin anythin' approaching clean. Though I ain't taking you on in no competitions ...'

She finished, dried herself and dressed, still watching the other narrowly. The Rural frowned, from her to the bathtub and back. She knelt to dabble at the still-warm water; then began to tug, uncertainly, at the filthy dress.

'Glory be,' said the American girl. 'Don't tell me it worked. Anythin' I can do, you can do better. That's it, ain't it? Well, you just hold up there while I get some more water on ...' She heaved a sigh of relief. 'This,' she said, 'is goin' to be one of the great moments of my life ...'

The Rural sat playing happily with the foam, batting big bright chunks of it about and slapping the water to make more. The warmth had made her feel comfortable and safe; she chuckled, the first really human sound she had made, and the American made a passing grab for the soap. She missed, and a tussling ensued. The Rural laughed aloud; more water slopped over to join the already-considerable pool on the floor.

'For the thirteen dozenth time,' said the American, 'you ain't in there to play. Jeeze, it's lucky we ain't got no rubber ducks. Else I wouldn't get no co-operation at all ... Don't you wanna look smart when Johnny comes?'

She doused the Rural's hair. 'Medicated, that stuff said

it was,' she said. 'Hope to hell it was a strong medicine ...' She began to soap, vigorously. 'He'll be along any day now,' she said. 'Along the road. Or maybe he'll come by water. That's why I'm hangin' on here. It's a rendezvous, see? "Wait by the Great Cross," he said. Last thing, before we split up. "Go to the Great Cross". It won't be for long ...'

She paused in her work, eyes vague. 'You see, we even got our own names for places,' she said. 'Secret places, all up and down the country. Everybody in Johnny's Party. All the Truckers. Maybe they're on the road already. And this time it's gonna work. Because we're all in it together. You heard of the police? They're comin' in. The real police, not their Goddam Commissars. And the army. You know you even got the scraps left of an army?'

She poured more water from one of the saucepans. 'It wasn't the old guys' fault,' she said. 'The guys who set this whole mess up right at the start. You see, they didn't allow for hate. What it could do. You know about hate, honey? You got any hate there, in that funny little mind?'

The Rural watched her, solemn-eyed. She set the saucepan back on the stove, began scrubbing. 'There is a colour appearin' here,' she said, 'that a friendly observer might even describe as pink ...' She sighed. 'It was hate made the Rurals,' she said. 'People like you. And me. Hate split this Goddam little country, zap. Straight down the middle. They thought they could do without us, see? They thought they were smart. Because they could make tin cans. Maybe you think that's smart too. Makin' a tin can. But it ain't. Not really ...'

She sluiced water, used a towel briskly and moved her position. 'Gimme a foot,' she said. 'Yeah, any one will do. You sittin' on that soap again?'

She bent over her task. 'But the hatin' didn't stop there,' she said. 'They got rid of all they could. Pulled it down, just broke it up. Then they turned on each other. It was all up

for grabs. First it was one mob runnin' crazy, then the next. Then the Docks and Waterways got theirselves a hold. That was worst of all, that was when the shantys really got started. They reckon fifty thousand died that first winter. So we had the Peoples' War. That didn't solve nothing either.' She returned the limb on which she had been working to its proper element. 'C'mon now, don't get coy. Gimme the other one ...

'I wish you could hear Johnny,' she said. 'Hear him talk. I get through a lot o' words, but I can't talk like him. About what we've lost, the music and all. All the things they reckoned they could do without. But that's what hate does, see? You get all churned up. Everybody gets to be the Enemy.' She slapped the other's leg. 'Come on, back up there. I want you kneelin' ...'

She added the rest of the hot water. 'Johnny was born on wheels,' she said. 'Just like all the others. His old man used to truck coal an' cement up the M68. That's why he understands them, he talks their language as well. There's a lot born on wheels, now. Die on wheels too. You didn't know that, did you? I guess you ain't ever seen a Trucker cemetery though. They build 'em on the centre reservations ...'

She wielded the soap. 'That's where they made their big mistake,' she said. 'With their own people. Forcin' 'em on to the road. They weren't brothers under the skin no more then. Not after that. That's what Johnny could see. Why he was smart. You seen the big Jugs, ain't you? The ones with the living cabs? Just prime movers, back the whole fambo on to the load ... I seen families with three-four, sometimes five-six kids, all livin' in a space about eight foot square ...'

'That's where Johnny got his big idea from. Gettin' 'em all together, all the Truckers all over the country, all the people that were just plain sick an' tired. And when that

started, man did it spread. Like a prairie fire. That's when we got interested. In the U.S. The ones that cared. That's why I came over. Wasn't a thing we could do, before ...'

She laughed. 'You should see those trucks,' she said. 'They think it's all a gas. Sort of a Mickey Mouse new religion. Well, I guess it is a religion. In a way. But Mickey Mouse ain't got nothin' to do with it.' She shook her head. 'They put one artist on that damn Commissariat of theirs, they'd understand. But they're still makin' tins of pilchards ...'

She flicked lather from her hands and pushed the Rural's shoulders. 'OK,' she said, 'sit back down now. And gimme the left paw. No, you don't wanna go slappin' that stuff round no more. You done enough ...' She began brushing delicately, working the bristles under the small flat nails. "'*Der Herr ist gross und sehr löblich,*"' she said. 'That's Johnny's waggon. Know what it means? "*The Lord is great, and highly to be praised ...*" Sounds good, don't it? It's right too. Because one day, he's goin' to be King. King Johnny the First. Or maybe the Second. Then there's "*On Calvary that is so hye,*" she's a great big truck. I seen folk stand an' laugh when she goes by, with her name boards an' all. Only they don't know the rest of the words.'

She paused in her work. "'*On Calvary that is so hye,*" she said, "*ther shall I be. Man to restore, naylid full sore, uppon a tre ...*" "Man to restore" ... That's what she's for, honey. What she's all about. There's gonna be some nailin's too, before she's through ...'

She moved round the bath, captured the Rural's other hand. 'Girl,' she said, 'you got tidemarks where I wouldn't of even thought of tidemarks. But we're nearly through.' She scotched on to a crate. 'Get to sayin' 'em through in my head sometimes,' she said. 'All the names. Sort of like hymns. "*Thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress.*"

That's a great name for a truck as well. And you know what she's carryin'? Enough hardware to flatten a fair-size town. We brought that in. She's got thank-you placards all the way round; and they don't even know ... Then there's "*Kys thy moder, Jhesu.*" Can't mistake her. She's got an icon on her forehead, right here. Slap over the windshield. Real icon too, found it on a rubbish tip in back of the British Museum. And "*Edi be thu, heaven-quene* ..." That's Middle English, that really get's 'em guessin' ... And "*Go hert, hert with adversitee* ..." She'll do her share of hurtin' one day. Soon, now ...'

She stood up, held out a big towel. 'Come on,' she said. 'I ain't doin' no more now. We'll renew the onslaught in the morning ...'

She swathed the other and sat her down, began rubbing her hair. 'I guess you reckon I'm nuts,' she said. 'I ain't though. We had this bitty setback, had to scatter, but that don't hurt the plan. The plan's all made, ready to go. We bin plannin' for years, travellin' up and down, anywhere a lorry could go. Or a boat. That's why we used the canals ...'

She threw the hand towel down, picked up another. 'When we move,' she said, 'they'll all move. All the folk I told you about. And the Rurals. Even the old Prof, he's got himself a crossbow hid away. Works real good, too. You just think about that. All the shantys, all boillin' up together. Like pokin' a stick in a termite nest. And you know what we're gonna do then?'

The Rural stared, eyes big in candlelight. Her lips moved; but she made no sound.

'We're gonna blow the roads,' said the American girl. 'Every drag's carryin' enough blasting sticks to take out a Motorway. Then we go in. Take the cities. Take the power stations. We got the hardware, and we got the knowhow. But we got something else as well. A good old-fashioned

Cause. Honey, you know why the middle classes lost out all those years back? They'd been on top too long, is all. Their brains got addled, they couldn't think straight no more. And that's what's going to happen again. To the new Brass. They bin rulin' the roost twenty years now, they've had it easy. They ain't bin kicked around, not like us. Well, you start kickin' a guy and he'll start thinkin'. Harder you kick, the harder he thinks. It's gonna be our turn now. Because this stinkin' little country has had enough. Jeeze, it ain't even Goddam Communism. When Johnny blows that whistle, we're goin' to be in London inside a day ...'

She hauled the bathtub to the door. She said, 'You wanna go outside again? Nope? Best get that bed made up then. And get these on ...'

She arranged blankets busily, turned to see the Rural still pawing in a baffled way at the garments she had thrown to her. She said, 'Jeeze, you even forgotton pyjamas? You put your feet in, dope. Come here ...'

The night was sticky and hot. The Jugs roared from the embankment; twice thunder grumbled in the distance, but the storm came no closer. The American lay sleepless, conscious of the dead bulk of the great tree hanging close over the roof, hearing the other's steady breathing from across the shack. Some time in the small hours, she dozed.

She woke to weight and warmth. She said foggily, 'What the hell you doin' here ...' The Rural snuggled, contentedly. She suffered, frowning, the cupping of her breast; but when the other began to move rhythmically against her she hauled up, still half asleep, and brought her a smart slap. 'You just cut that right out,' she said. 'That ain't no way ...' She settled back, grumbling. 'Reckoned you was like a damn puppy dog,' she said. 'You even got all the vices ...' Then she reached in the faint light, brushed the other's lashes with her fingers. 'Hey,' she said, 'there ain't

no call for that. Come on, dope, I ain't mad at you ...' She groped under the blanket she had folded as a pillow, produced a handkerchief. 'Do I gotta do every Goddam thing?' she said. 'Blow ...'

She slipped an arm round the other's shoulders, pulled her close. She smelled, now, sweet and clean. The American lay and stared at the half-seen ceiling. In time the snuffling grew less. She said, 'You know what? I always wanted a kid sister. Or a kid of my own. Somebody I could talk to. Like I talk to you. Well, neither ain't goin' to happen now. So I guess I'm stuck with you.' She stroked the other's hair back from her face. She said, 'Guess if you counted them, I got more hangups than you, Babba. Know what I mean?'

She grinned, and sat up slightly. 'Hey,' she said, 'that's kinda pretty. Honey, you got a brand new name ...'

But the Rural made no response. She had drifted back to sleep.

The American rose early, shrugged herself into the wind-cheater. She stood staring down a moment at the other, still lying tousled; then she left the shack, easing the door to gently behind her. Silvery mist shrouded the high bank, clung round the concrete pilings on which the little restaurant stood. Through the mist, as ever, moved the lorries. She started to walk towards the deserted steak house, one hand thrust deep into her pocket. She found a flight of rusted iron steps, and began to climb.

She was back in half an hour, carrying a dusty metal can and with her lips compressed into a line. The Rural was sitting up among the blankets, looking distressed. She ran to her when she appeared, with a little whimper of relief.

The American girl set the can down, 'It's OK, honey,' she said. 'I hadn't gone far. I found us some cleanin' stuff.' She pursed her lips again. 'Honey,' she said, 'you know anything about that steakhouse? What happened there?'

The other looked blank; then her eyes lighted on the tin bath. She ran to haul it into the centre of the room. She knelt banging the side and looking hopeful; and the American's expression softened. She put her hands on her hips and laughed. 'No way, hon,' she said. 'Ain't goin' through that performance twice in twelve hours. You won't get dusty, you'll keep awhile. C'mon now, we got other things to do ...'

She set a saucepan on the stove. 'One thing I shall never understand,' she said, 'is how you kept your teeth good. Come on now, you get set in that chair ...'

After the meal she examined the other critically. 'Phase Two of the big cleanup,' she said, 'is about to commence.' She had produced from somewhere a pair of folding scissors and a comb. She turned the Rural's head, gently, her fingers under her chin. 'A little layerin',' she said, 'is goin' to produce a minor miracle. Also, you are sufferin' from splittin' ends ...'

She draped a towel round the other's shoulders. 'For my sins,' she said, 'this was once on a time my gainful employment. You just would not believe how tired you can get starin' at wealthy ladies' unwashed necks. Hey, keep your head still you nut. It ain't goin' to improve you only havin' half an ear ...'

She worked deftly, with many pauses for assessment. Small drifts of cut hair gathered on the towel. She found a parting, sucked her teeth, changed her mind and started again. The scissors clicked steadily; finally she seemed satisfied. She walked right around the Rural, who followed her with baffled eyes. 'I think,' she said softly, 'Madam will not be displeased ...' She flicked the towel away and turned her attention to the other's hands, first carefully demonstrating the use of the scissors on her own nails. 'Don't you go prancin' round now,' she said when she had finished.

'We ain't done yet ...'

The Rural sat obediently still while she sorted clothes, frowning and holding them to the light. 'By rights,' she said, 'these could stand a deal more airin'. Also pressing would be a distinct advantage. But since we don't seem to have a dryclean joint within hail, we shall have to make the best of it ...'

She chose, finally, a shirt and belted three-quarter length skirt. The Rural reached for them, curiously; but she shook her head. 'First,' she said, 'you are goin' to be introduced to the grand old British custom of underpants. Oh, God ... No, your legs go in 'em, you dope. What you think you got there, an Ascot hat?'

After a certain struggle, the investment was completed. 'Sort of like the end of a saga,' said the American girl. 'And you have no idea what a relief it is to me ...' The shirt followed, and the skirt. The American cinched the belt tight, brushed at the hem. 'Those creases'll drop out mostly,' she said. 'I suppose I seen worse. Least you had the sense to store 'em high. Sit down now, babs. These are sandals. They go on your feet. Look, try a little lateral thinkin', won't you? That's it. That's a girl ...'

She gave a last touch to the Rural's hair, stood back. Then she took her hand, gently, pulled her forward to the dressing table and tilted the mirror. 'Look, honey,' she said. 'That's what they took away from you. And I gave it back. Did you ever see hair so black? Did you ever see eyes quite so Goddam blue ...?'

The other's mouth opened slowly. She stared; at the mirror, down at herself, back to the mirror; and suddenly it seemed the eyes of the American girl stung, so that she brushed irritably at her face, squeezed the top of her nose. 'Well,' she said, 'put this down as a million-year typing error. Honey, I'm startin' to realise what God felt like. I

only made a human being. He made the whole damn world ...'

There was a shout, from the direction of the canal.

The American sprang away from the window with much of the speed of a cat. She pressed herself to the wall, and swore. Two men were climbing the bank from the water. Behind them, dim in the mist that still clung to the cutting, drifted a long many-windowed boat, its fibreglass cabin top finished in cream and blue.

The Rural had leaped back, alarmed. The other turned to her. 'Stay here,' she said urgently. 'And keep down. You understand? Whatever happens, *keep out of sight* ...'

She ran through the door. The strangers paused at sight of her and shouted again, their voices echoing and blurred.

The American girl moved to her right. 'You come on up here,' she said. 'I ain't engagin' in no hog-callin' contest ...'

At the sound of her voice the newcomers stiffened. Then shiny things appeared as if by magic in their hands; and the old challenges, incomprehensible now but still chilling, rang up from the water.

'Reach, by Huskalon!'

'Reach, by Mikalfot!'

The American girl had dropped once more into the same strange half-crouch. She held her arms out, both together, stiffly pointing; and it seemed she was the Thunder-thing after all, for noise burst from her fingertips. Noise, and a pencil of dark flame. Blood and cloth scraps flew from the nearer man; he spun back down the slope and the noise came again. A figure crashed from the foredeck of the boat; then the sound was all round about, and sparkling from the line of cabin windows.

The Rural was standing, dazed, at the American's side. She swore again and lunged at her, knocking her off her feet. She said, 'Y' crazy bitch, get down ...' She recoiled,

shocked, rolled to the foot of the Convolvulus King. She lay staring back and up. On the forecourt of the restaurant now stood a great red lorry. Nameboards adorned its sides; from tailboard and cabin top swung the bright tinsels of the Trucker Cult. Thin smoke-streaks sped from its cab; and the noise was redoubled in a great thunder-crash. The canal boat swung sideways, smoke pouring from its shattered cabin. Another explosion, a ball of light; and it began to burn, the smoke from it rolling up darkly over the bank.

The American girl was kneeling on the grass, her hair hanging, the pistol still gripped in her fist. She said weakly, 'My God. The Cavalry came. Baby, come on ...'

But she couldn't move. The lorry on the forecourt, the red lorry, seemed to be burning as well now, like a flame. Men ran from it; and it was as if a shutter clicked open, in her mind.

They had been efficient. They closed and locked the restaurant doors, lowered the slatted blinds. Hair hung to their shoulders; and their eyes held no expression. Guns were in their hands; she had tried to run, panting, and her way had been barred. The faces laughed at her; she was forced back and down, while her father knelt in the kitchen, crying and calling for Jesus. She crawled to him, when they had finished with her. She tried to lie across him; but they pulled her away and stamped, and stamped, and stamped ...

Afterwards, she supposed she had known what to do. 'If anything happens,' he had said, 'if anything ever happens to me, get down to the shack. Stay down there with the Rurals, nobody'll look for you there ...'

Her hands went to her throat. She knew now what the Blue Monkey had been. Why it had come. She glared down at the clothes she wore, her own clothes, and screamed at the top of her voice.

'They killed him ...!'

The men were running now along the top of the bank. Some carried bulky packages. Another, fair-haired, stood poised above the cab top. He shouted, 'Helen, for Christ's sake! Come on!'

'Give me a hand! I can't move her!'

'There's no time! We're setting charges! Get *moving* ...!'

The American choked. She said to the boy with the rocket launcher, 'Put one into that. It don't deserve to stand ...' Smoke fled with a roar; and the windows of the restaurant flew outwards. Bright orange flame licked up at once inside.

Doors slammed. The engine of the huge drag bellowed. It lurched and moved forward. More men tumbled aboard. The long cab seemed full of them. The road behind erupted, in a thunderous sheet of flame.

The American girl crammed her knuckles at her mouth. Tears were on her throat; and she was craning, trying to see behind her. She said, 'Oh my God, oh my God,' and the fair-haired driver laughed. He said, 'Cut out the Bonny and Clyde bit honey, we all know you do it great ...'

The road ahead, the bright haze where London lay, seemed to dance and shimmer. But she held tight to the Rural crouched beside her, feeling her tremble as the juggernaut gathered speed. She said in quite a different voice, 'Wake up, you bloody city, bang your bells. We're on our way to eat you ...'

AND THE MOON SAYS GOODNIGHT

by

MARTIN I. RICKETTS

Martin Ricketts here presents a story in which the dramas of space—and by that we mean the wider concerns of the Universe—and the dramas of our personal lives interact in such a way as to make nonsense of the views of those who claim one is more important than the other. This story may be taken as an analogue of any of many current situations; but it is in the very nature of SF to enquire into problems that may possibly be very real in any of the multi-layered futures. But, restricting observation to the former premise, when you look at a child of nine or ten today with all the wonders and horrors and uncertainties of the future opening out ahead, think of Ross, and ponder, and perhaps pity—and act?

AND THE MOON SAYS GOODNIGHT

Ross opened his book and pointed at a picture of a long dark furry thing on a green leaf.

'What's that, Daddy?'

'It's a caterpillar,' I told him.

He fell silent for the rest of our journey, but I couldn't help feeling that his book provided him with more wonder than the fact that I was about to introduce him to the man who had saved the world. Or maybe nine was too young to appreciate what that meant. But then I remembered I was little older myself when I first met Edgar Daniletti and the impact he made on me then was something I have never forgotten. Maybe things would be different when we actually came face to face with the old man.

Not surprisingly, for I was almost twenty years older then, I remember my second meeting with Edgar Daniletti more clearly than the first. Yet curiously it is the last stage of the journey I made to meet him that second time that remains the most vivid in my memory. I was trembling as I stepped down out of the shuttle on to an Earth that I had not visited in eighteen years and, although it was raining, I moved without haste into the hover-bus that took the shuttle's passengers to the arrival lounge. There Birdlong, Daniletti's valet, was waiting for me.

'Pleasant trip?'

Birdlong was a large, balding man. His expensive finely

cut clothes concealed a solid muscular body, and the omission of 'sir' from his greeting reminded me that he was more than just a servant. He strode out of the Earth-down building and held open the door of Daniletti's hover-zine for me.

'How's the Old World doing?' I asked him as the robot driver swept us soundlessly out into the traffic. He didn't answer and I contented myself with staring at the façades of the new ugly buildings which hadn't been there in my childhood. Then we entered an area of sharp bends that we took without reducing speed. The genuine leather bucket seats moved reciprocally to make the motion less violent to our bodies, and this provoked his only comment.

'Progress,' he said. 'We can't even enjoy a bumpy ride nowadays.'

Then we arrived at Daniletti's house and I was shown into the room where he and I were to work out the initial details of the plan that was to save mankind.

Now, almost thirty years later, I was surprised to feel the old tremble come into my arms as the shuttle up-ended for its final touch-down. I looked at Ross and felt unreasoning anger that he should still have his nose buried nonchalantly in his book, and quickly I suppressed the emotion. Then I realised that my thoughts were being unjust to him, for he suddenly looked up at me and said, 'Dad, what is a variable?'

'It's a special kind of star, son,' I told him, and then gritted my teeth as I began the old familiar struggle with gravity for possession of my stomach.

'But what makes it special?' he asked as we filed out into bright sunlight.

'It's a star that varies its magnitude. That means it is brighter sometimes than at others. Most of them actually increase in size.'

Ross nodded, but I could tell he didn't really understand.

We took our seats in the hover-bus.

The only manifest change in Birdlong was that his long side-whiskers were now almost pure white. We shook hands, exchanged greetings like the old friends we weren't, and I introduced him to Ross. He smiled to show how suitably impressed he was and then walked us through the arrival lounge. He held open the door of the hover-zine. Ross clambered in and knelt on the back seat gazing through the rear window. I sat in the front. Birdlong got in beside me and activated the motor. The robot driver took us out into the traffic with the old familiar verve and swerve.

We had almost completed the journey before I found the courage to ask:

'Any change?'

'He's no worse. And we've now got the best medical attention for him.'

'How best?'

Over the years my relationship with Birdlong had developed into a mutual cynical respect. Now he turned his hard shrewd eyes on me and said:

'Doctor Emmanuel J. Marriner.'

I repeated the name thoughtfully, pursed my lips and looked out of the side window.

'No, neither have I,' Birdlong said. 'But Sheila has given me her strongest assurance that he is the best.'

'I can still show the bruises of Sheila's previous strong assurances,' I told him, and then we were sweeping in through the large open gateway of Daniletti's house.

Edgar had been given my room, it was explained, and I would have to have the old reading room. It was a small room with a dilapidated desk at one end and a floor to ceiling bookcase filling three of the four walls. Behind the desk the temporary camp-bed was still there after thirty years.

I washed, changed and went downstairs.

Birdlong had arranged for a trusted robot butler to take Ross on a conducted tour of the house, and I was shown into the large ground-floor room that I remembered so well. There Sheila Talbot, Daniletti's personal secretary, was waiting for me.

'Hello, Dick.'

A robot maid was prodding with an ancient brass poker the remains of the coal fire that glowed in the large antique fireplace. Sheila was sitting on the long sofa in front of the fire. She waited for the maid to clatter out and then she said :

'I don't want a word said to him.'

'I can't very well not speak to him now that I've come all this way.' I told her.

She gave me a withering look. 'You know what I mean.'

I smiled. 'Who's this doctor you've got looking after him?'

'Marriner.' She looked at the fire. It was late evening and the lights hadn't been turned on. The glow from the fire softened her otherwise bleak features. She was a tall blonde, three years my junior, with wide blue eyes and long soft hair, but any sexual attractiveness she possessed was obviated by her brisk, business-like manner. 'He's a good man.'

'There are lots of good men. What happened to Cooper?'

'He had to go. He was going to tell Edgar the truth, said it was better for him. But I don't want him told, Dick. I don't want a word said to him.'

She turned again to look at me, but now I was standing behind her, my hands on the back of the sofa, and she had to crane her neck to see me: I felt it gave me a psychological advantage. There was a momentary pause.

'So Marriner's a good man.'

'For God's sake, Dick, Edgar's dying. What difference

does it make who his doctor is?’

Then Birdlong’s huge old form appeared in the doorway. We both turned to look at him, and then at the tall, almost cadaverous man who came in behind him.

‘Mr Hale,’ Birdlong said to me, ‘may I introduce Doctor Marriner.’

‘Doctor Marriner,’ I said. We shook hands. He was a handsome man, neat and elegant, and quick to smile. His bright eyes spoke of a keen intelligence and I began to think Sheila’s judgement had been right; he seemed a vast improvement on the bumbling, slow-witted Cooper. ‘How’s the patient?’

‘Mr Daniletti is comfortable,’ he said in the glib guarded tone that all his profession use. ‘He’s under sedation at the moment. You should be able to see him after dinner’—he looked at his watch—‘in about three hours.’

‘Talking about dinner,’ Sheila said, making for the door. ‘I’d better make sure those damn robots aren’t going on the blink again : I’m sure no one fancies charcoal for the main dish.’

Birdlong followed her out.

‘How long have you been his doctor, doctor?’ I said to Marriner.

Marriner stepped closer to the fire. Ross suddenly moved past the window on my left being taken to see the bowling green by the robot butler. The robot looked like a tall penguin, and I wondered if real human butlers had ever looked like that.

‘It must be almost a year now,’ Marriner said. ‘You’ve known him a long time, I understand.’

‘A long time.’ I nodded. ‘Yes.’ I turned to the table looking for a drink, then remembered I hadn’t been given one. I walked over to the window and stood looking out at the dusk, my back to the doctor. In the window I could see the reflection of the fire and Marriner standing beside it. I saw

him move away.

'I'd better see how he is,' he said.

Then he left the room and I was left alone to stare out at the tall leafless trees that marked the edge of Daniletti's estate silhouetted black against the winter sky, and remember previous times in this room with a man who was regarded to have had the greatest mind since Einstein.

'It's all a matter of timing, Richard,' he had told me. 'I'm sure of that. That's all it needs: just timing.'

'Timing?' I asked him. 'How can we hope to pitch human brains against cybernetic ones and rely on timing to win?'

But he looked thoughtfully at his notes as if he hadn't heard. 'What intellects must have created these things,' he said. 'What minds they must have had. Have you seen this picture? The detail is magnificent.' He slid the large photograph across the oiled table-top; but I had seen it. The Harkerbeast were filthy things, huge cybernetic creatures that lived only in deep space, deriving all the energy they needed from starlight, their only purpose apparently to destroy any and every intelligent being that they encountered in space. They were virtually invulnerable: there was—at that time—no known way that they could be killed without a frightening number of human lives being lost in the process. Yet Edgar Daniletti, with my assistance, was trying to find a way ...

'I've unpacked your bags.' Birdlong's gruff voice jolted me out of my reverie and I shot forward thirty years to the present. 'The old spare wardrobe is still in the reading room, so if you want to dress for dinner ...'

I turned to look at him. 'Yes ... Fine. Thank you.' I moved over to the door conscious of his heavy gaze.

'You're still the same,' he said.

'Sorry?' I stopped in the doorway.

'You and Sheila. You haven't seen each other for nearly twenty years and almost at once you square up to each

other like the protagonists of a duel.'

I shrugged, and left him there warming his back against the fire.

I didn't change at once. First I scanned the bookcases, and found the most handled book in the collection exactly where I knew I would. I took it down and placed it on the desk. It fell open at a page near the middle and I leaned forward to look at it. But I didn't need to read; even after twenty years I still knew the text by heart—the explanations about how the Harkerbeast moved from star to star across the galaxy establishing themselves in orbit around each star in turn where they spread wide their 'wings'—huge matrices of interconnecting cells which could be as large as a billion square miles—which would trap and store the energy radiated by the star; and about how they would remain in these orbits for indeterminate periods of time, anything from one orbit to (so it was said) a hundred thousand years. There were manifold reasons why no one knew where the Harkerbeast originally came from or who created them; it was known only that an increasing number were approaching Earth's sector of space from the direction of the galactic centre. The theory that was put forward in this book had never been bettered: that the Harkerbeast were sophisticated weapons which had been built millennia ago by a race of beings who were by now probably long extinct.

The first Harkerbeast was discovered in 2312 when it attacked and completely destroyed a civilian liner, the *David Harker*. A battleship was sent to investigate and this was destroyed too. Then a force of several battleships were sent and these also were destroyed.

Realising at last that the Harkerbeast was virtually invulnerable, and aware of the consequences of allowing it to continue on its present course through the heart of the

empire, the Earth Government of that time convened a board of military experts with a view to finding a way of eliminating the creature. But even before this meeting took place they were informed of the discovery of more Harkerbeast approaching the Earth sector in relatively large numbers.

In order to avoid large-scale panic this news was not immediately given to the public at large; but its dreadful implications were not lost on the government. What, for instance, would happen if a Harkerbeast established itself in an orbit around the sun? Ships would no longer be able to leave Earth or any other planet in the Solar System without being destroyed immediately. For the same reason no ships would be able to approach the Solar System from outside. The consequences were obvious. Interstellar trade would halt and the whole economy of the empire would collapse, bringing death to the colonists of many newly annexed worlds. It was imperative therefore that a method of destroying Harkerbeast was found.

Within a year a method was evolved, but it was a method high in its cost in lives and equipment. And it could only be used when the Harkerbeast was in deep space, for once in orbit around a star a Harkerbeast has a virtually inexhaustible supply of energy at its disposal with which it can defend itself against any number of would-be attackers. In deep space too a Harkerbeast carries with it a large reservoir of energy which it has collected during its last star-stop and which will last until it reaches its next. The amount of energy it uses for its own sustenance is negligible and the main reason it carries its energy supply is in order to feed its energy tubes should it encounter a vessel of intelligent beings on its journey. This it will destroy by collapsing a part of itself like a bellows to eject a concentrated stream of its energy against the target.

The method for eliminating the Harkerbeast was there-

fore very simple. Manned spacecraft were sent against it one by one until its reservoir of energy was exhausted, and then it could be destroyed at leisure. There was no other way. It was proved unfeasible to send one ship to attack the Harkerbeast, and then another to destroy it while its attention was thus distracted, for a Harkerbeast was capable of outmanoeuvring any number of the most sophisticated ships that Earth could send against it. To send robot ships was equally impractical, for a Harkerbeast could detect the difference between ships carrying intelligent beings and those not up to a distance of more than eighty astronomical units; no one has yet discovered how.

I picked up the book and read the last paragraph of the chapter: 'The above-mentioned method—what has become known as the "suicide line-up"—is the one that is still in use today. However, it is the present writer's opinion that continuing use of this method will ultimately defeat its own ends. The efficacy of this method depends on the use of a minimum of eight battleships at once against one Harkerbeast, seven of which are invariably lost with their entire crews. The moral unacceptability of these losses apart, at the rate at which Harkerbeast are now appearing in Earth's sector of the galaxy the whole economy of the empire will have to be directed to destroying them within ten years of the date of writing. At the present rate of loss in lives and equipment the empire will collapse as surely as if the Harkerbeast were left alone to wreak their havoc. Unless a new, economical and relatively safe way of destroying Harkerbeast is found, therefore, the empire will come to an end within the lifetime of most of us ...'

'A new, economical and relatively safe way.' At the time it seemed impossible, yet less than ten years after that book was published Edgar Daniletti had found such a way.

'What I've never been able to understand,' Marriner

said at dinner, 'is exactly how this variable star method works.'

We were all five of us in Daniletti's oak-panelled dining room. We confronted each other across the huge circular dining table in a strained silence, for following his tour of the grounds Ross had left a trail of muddy footprints across the hall carpet that the robot maid had been unable to remove completely.

'It's quite simple,' I told him. 'It's all a matter of timing—and of course the Harkerbeast has to be in exactly the right place when you want him there, which makes it just as well that variable stars are relatively plentiful at the fringes of the empire.'

'Plentiful?' Marriner shook his head. 'I'd never even heard of one until I came here.'

'Yes, you had. Betelgeuse is about the most heard-of star of all.'

An automatic silence fell as a robot waiter came smoothly in, the glow from the candles reflected in its polished metal flanks. It took away the empty dishes of the main course with its four left arms while serving the dessert deftly with its right.

'All right,' the doctor said finally. 'it's all a matter of timing. I understand that. And I know that you have to make the Harkerbeast head for the variable star. But what I've never really understood is how you make him do that. I've always been led to believe that a Harkerbeast's sole purpose is to destroy every intelligent living creature that he encounters in deep space. Surely when you bring your spaceship within range of his sensors his instinct is to destroy you rather than run away.'

'A variable star is one that varies its magnitude,' Ross said proudly, and we all turned to look at him. But rather than take advantage of this to continue the demonstration of his erudition he returned his attention to the plate of fruit

jelly on the table in front of him. Suddenly I felt a light pressure on my foot. I was puzzled for a moment until I realised that Sheila, who was sitting diagonally opposite me on my left, had her shoe off and was caressing my foot with hers. Surprised, I drew my leg back quickly and looked at her. Instantly she started to blush and I realised what had happened. I had had my leg stretched well out under the table and Sheila must have mistaken my foot for the doctor's, who was sitting on my right. Now I knew why she had had Cooper replaced—she hadn't been thinking of Edgar's welfare at all. I cleared my throat.

'It's quite true, doctor. A Harkerbeast's instinct is to kill everything, but he also has another instinct, that of self-preservation.'

'I don't follow you.'

'A Harkerbeast, once he leaves a star, travels to another that he has already chosen. During that journey he is at his most vulnerable, for he has only a limited supply of power for his energy-tubes and can therefore destroy only a limited number of his "enemies" before that power runs out, leaving him helpless and—to all intents and purposes—dead. He would obviously much rather be in orbit around a star when he confronts his enemies, for that way he can both destroy his enemies *and* survive to destroy again. The first thing a Harkerbeast will do, therefore, when he senses your ship, is to scan for the nearest star—forgetting his target star, unless that is the nearest—and then calculate whether he can reach that star before your ship comes close enough to be a potential danger to him. This is where the timing starts to come in, for you will already have made sure that the nearest star is a variable and that the Harkerbeast *will* be able to reach it and establish an orbit around it before your ship gets too close to him.'

Marriner nodded. 'I see.' He looked across at Sheila and smiled, and suddenly I was very angry.

'Do you, doctor?' I said. 'Do you really appreciate how many years of heart-breaking research it took before Edgar Daniletti established those few simple facts. And only then could he begin the calculations that resulted after more years of sweat and heartache in his final equations. Mankind owes him a hell of a lot. Do you know that he would hardly eat or sleep every day for more than eight consecutive years because he knew that each moment wasted meant more human lives lost in the fight against the Harkerbeast. And whenever he *had* to pause in his work, he cried, doctor. Cried! Do you really appreciate what that means?'

I looked around the table filled with a sudden intense rage because the man I was talking about lay dying in a room somewhere above us while we sat here in his house eating his food and people who were supposed to be caring for him were playing footsie under his table. Sheila stared at me white-faced while Birdlong gazed abstractedly into the small yellow flame of the candles. Ross looked at me in bewilderment. Only Marriner remained expressionless. There was a long uncomfortable silence and then he said quietly, 'But what happens when the Harkerbeast has established an orbit around the variable star and your ship comes into range?'

For a moment I contemplated not answering him, and then I felt my anger begin to drain away under his frank friendly gaze. But it was Sheila who spoke. 'Don't worry about the carpet, Ross,' she said gently, more to change the subject than because she meant it. And then the tall robot butler appeared in the doorway.

'Coffee and brandy are being served in the lounge,' it said through its old-fashioned immobile voice-grill.

At ten-thirty we were allowed at last into the old man's bedroom. I was prepared for the worst, but I could not be-

lieve that this thin white-faced man who lay breathing noisily and with difficulty under the heavy sheets was the same keen-eyed, wavy-haired professor I had last seen almost twenty years before. We all gathered in the small room under the dim indirect lighting and I leaned down towards him.

'Richard,' he whispered, and his dry pink tongue almost fell out over his lower lip as he tried to draw breath. The yellow flesh of his cheeks was taut and translucent and his eyes were pale and half-closed. His bony hand sought mine across the sheets.

'Hello, Edgar,' I said.

'A long time,' he wheezed, so quietly that I almost couldn't hear him. 'Richard.' He tried to smile and almost made it. His eyes started to search the part of the room that he could see without moving his head. 'Have you ... brought ... ?'

'Yes.' I smiled. 'I brought him.'

I turned and held out my hand for Ross to step forward. He came uncertainly, staring at the old eager face in a mixture of fear and awe. 'Ross, I'd like you to meet Edgar Daniletti, the best friend your father ever had.'

'Pleased to know you, sir,' Ross said, quietly.

'Ross,' the old man wheezed, his eyes shining. 'How are you, boy?'

'Very well, thank you, sir.'

Edgar's claw-like hand pulled at my coat and I leaned closer to him. 'Did you tell him?' he said. 'Did you tell him how we did it? Eh?' He almost chuckled. 'We did it, the two of us. We saved the world. Me and you together, Richard. We did it. You told him, didn't you?'

'Yes, Edgar,' I said. I smiled, feeling very sad. 'I told him.'

He leaned back on to the pillow, smiling at Ross. And then he began to cough and I saw Birdlong's worried glance

at Marriner. The doctor came forward and pulled the sheets up under Edgar's shrivelled chin.

'That's all for tonight, lady and gentlemen,' he said. 'Mr Daniletti has to rest now.'

Edgar Daniletti died the next day. Ross and I stayed for the funeral. It was a quiet one, televised throughout the Solar System and recorded for export to the rest of the empire.

On the morning we were due to leave, Ross went missing. I found him roaming the corridors on the second floor.

'Miss Talbot's not in her room,' he complained. 'I want to say goodbye.'

'You'll see her before we leave.' I rubbed his hair; but I could see he wasn't mollified. 'Okay, son, we'll go and find her for you.'

On the way to Sheila's room we had to pass Marriner's door. As we drew level it suddenly opened. Marriner came out wrapping his dressing gown around himself. He saw us and pulled the door shut quickly behind him, but not before Ross and I had glimpsed the woman in his bed.

'Miss Talbot!' Ross rushed past Marriner and pushed open the door. He ran over to the bed. 'I thought you weren't going to say goodbye!'

Sheila sat up in bed. She was naked, but she had pulled the sheets up to cover herself. 'Ross.' She smiled at him, and then looked up at the doctor and myself in the doorway. I looked at Marriner. He looked back at me with his calm steady gaze. 'Go downstairs, Ross,' Sheila said gently. 'I'll come and see you before you go.' Ross came back across the room. A robot servant came into the corridor, attracted by the noise. I pushed Ross gently towards it.

'Take him downstairs,' I said to it.

As they went I turned back to Marriner and Sheila. Marriner was now standing by the bed.

'So this is how you repay him,' I said.

There was a long silence. Then Sheila reached down for her dressing gown on the floor beside her. 'Dick, it's not how you think,' she said.

'How I think? Good God, Edgar's been dead a matter of days and here you are jumping into bed with his doctor in his own house. Is this why you got rid of the man who looked after Edgar for most of his life, just so that you could bring your lover in?'

At this Sheila leapt out of bed, blazing with anger.

'You've got a damn nerve, Dick,' she said. 'I wasn't the one who ran away just at the moment he most needed me ...'

'Sheila,' Marriner said gently. He put a restraining hand on her arm but she shook him off.

'Angela was his ward,' she said. 'He loved her, but you had to take her away from him.'

'I loved her too, Sheila. And she loved me. Doesn't that count for anything?'

'Good God, Dick, Edgar loved you *both*! He was lost, Dick, isolated, alone in a sea of publicity. He needed all the love he could get, and all the friends.'

'It was Angela who wanted to go,' I said.

'Yes,' she said bitterly. 'To keep you away from me.' Her mouth worked itself into the beginnings of a humourless smile. 'But I was never interested in you, Dick. Ever. All that was only inside her suspicious little mind ...'

Marriner grabbed Sheila's slender shoulders and pulled her back to him. He looked at me apologetically. But Sheila wasn't finished.

'Before you talk about repaying him, Dick,' she said, 'think about all that you've done. And don't impugn me just because I happened to fall in love with the most selfless man in the universe, something you're not.'

From the corner of my eye I saw Birdlong appear in the

doorway. He came in and touched my arm.

'Come on, Dick,' he said quietly.

'It was only because of Marriner that Edgar stayed alive as long as he did,' Birdlong said as we went down the wide carpeted stairs. 'He did wonders, Dick, things that Cooper could never have managed.'

'All that Edgar wanted was to see Ross . . .'

Birdlong nodded. 'Angela's son, that's all he wanted to stay alive for. Dick, I'm sorry about what happened to Angela.'

'Forget it,' I said. 'Accidents happen all too frequently out on the colonial worlds. It was ironical that it should have been a Harkerbeast, though; there's something poetic about it, don't you think?' I started to laugh almost hysterically, then stopped when I saw the look on his face.

We reached the bottom of the stairs.

'You're still angry, aren't you, Dick?' he said.

'Yes.'

'You shouldn't be. Edgar died happy, and therefore you should be happy. That's all you should concern yourself with now.'

I nodded politely and thought how ironical it was that in the end Edgar Daniletti's only desire had been to impress the child who was the nearest thing he had to a grandson. He hadn't cared what the rest of humanity thought of him, just so long as he knew that Ross knew that he was the man who saved the world—and not only the world, the universe.

Birdlong rode with us back to Earthdown. We sat in the 'zine in silence until Ross said:

'I don't get it, Dad. *How* does the variable star method work?'

'It's basically very simple, son,' I told him. 'You see, a

Harkerbeast always knows when there is more than one ship attacking him, and his computer-like brain can prepare for however many ships there are, even though his attention is only on his target when he's firing his energy-tubes. But when he's in orbit around a star he doesn't expect that star to reach out and grab him—which is virtually what happens with this method. The battleship has to approach the star at exactly the right moment, bring itself in close enough for the Harkerbeast to start firing at it. And at the same moment the variable star begins the perceptible phase of its expansion, virtually exploding itself outward. The 'beast doesn't realise what's happening until it's too late, and then he becomes caught and destroyed in the fire of the star. Meanwhile the battleship fires its retro-jets and slips sideways leaving the Harkerbeast's beam of destructive energy to move harmlessly past and dissipate in the depths of space. You can see how timing is all-important in this method, son, and Mr Daniletti's equations provide this timing virtually to the second. They provide for the battleship to be in the right place at the right time in relation to both the Harkerbeast and the variable star. A moment too soon and the Harkerbeast will have time both to destroy the ship and detect the star's expansion before it is itself destroyed; a moment too late and the Harkerbeast will have already detected the star's expansion and be moving out of harm's way, and thus have the battleship at its mercy—or lack of mercy, if you want to be more accurate.'

Birdlong said goodbye to us in the departure lounge.

'Sheila wasn't angry at what you said just now,' he told me after sending Ross off to buy a cola. 'Her anger is old and deep, going way back to the time when you chose Angela instead of her. And you're angry now because it hurts your ego to think she has someone else and no longer wants you.'

Ross and I rode out on the shuttle. Ross had his book on his lap once more and I sat there feeling sick and empty and reflecting on how wrong Birdlong was. There wasn't just anger in me, there was also bitterness—bitterness at a fate that allowed a man like Edgar Daniletti to die believing that humanity could sleep soundly because of what he had done. No one—except perhaps Doctor Cooper—would have been cruel enough to tell him the truth, that there was now a whole new resurgence in the numbers of Harkerbeast coming into the empire, that there were more of them now than could be eliminated by the variable star method alone. The old problem was back, only now there was no Edgar Daniletti to tackle it. To compete with the numbers of Harkerbeast coming into Earth's sector of the galaxy now both the variable star method and the old suicide line-up would have to be used. At the moment the army was depending on volunteers for the latter method. But in a matter of a few years, if the Earth empire was to remain viable, they would not be able to depend on volunteers alone. When that happened Ross would just about be at conscription age.

I looked at him and was suddenly shocked to notice how much he resembled Angela. He had his book open once more at the picture of the caterpillar. Maybe it's best that he thinks about things like that for as long as possible, I thought. But then I saw he wasn't looking at it.

'Look, Daddy,' he said, peering back through the vibrating window of the bus. 'Mr Birdlong's waving to us.'

I turned away from him and stared back at the people standing on the terrace of the terminal building. I tried to pick out Birdlong but couldn't.

I lifted my hand to my face and pretended to shield my eyes from the hard glare of the sun.

THE GAME WITH THE BIG HEAVY BALL

by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Enemy were extraordinarily clever, throwing mind-wraps, deceptions and earthquakes and generally battering at the defences, and even allies might suddenly and subtly change so that every single second must be spent to the full in keenly vigilant observation, ready for anything—but, all the same, it was nice when tea time came around.

THE GAME WITH THE BIG HEAVY BALL

I CARRIED my sister very carefully, so as not to wake her.

Dawn was breaking as I passed through the library door into the rear courtyard and round the north end of the house. The three massive pillars of wood which shored up the northern wall were still standing; but as I paused, resting one hand on the first beam to feel its cracked surface, I observed by the gouges in the earth at their base that the night's earthquake had shifted them.

Staring up the towering side of the house, I saw it remained intact. Even the ornate chimneys had not toppled. The windows looked down at me, blank, incurious, waiting.

'Ulysses should be back any day now,' I said.

I walked slowly through the overgrown grass of the lawn—it was a field now, might as well acknowledge the fact—and into the shrubbery. The shrub I particularly liked was flowering; it flowered all winter, bearing its sprays of little white blossoms, from October till the next April or May, and the most savage winds, springing over the cliff-top, could not shake off its little sprays of flower. This morning, there was no wind. It was a day of silence and of stillness after the uneasy night.

As I came out on to the cliff top and started down the twisting path to the beach, my sister stirred in my arms. I looked down at her face; she did not waken.

Half-way down the cliff, I paused and stared at the

expanse of the beach. On a clear day, the coast could be seen doubling and redoubling itself into the distance in a series of bays and headlands. This morning, next to nothing of the coast showed; the sky and the sea closed together quite near at hand, pale as a fish's mouth. The main feature was the ruin of the old lifeboat house, its few battered timbers and massive barnacle-encrusted base looming black between shelving sand and water. Of the pirates there was no sign.

As usual, I went barefoot. I advanced over the sand, its dark peppery granules crunching under my feet; seawrack lay about in heaps like horse dung. Balancing precariously, I climbed one of the sloping buttresses and advanced along the lifeboat house until I stood at the seaward end of its ramp.

I looked down into the clear dangerous water, into that dark lucid world of another element where pebbles lay like mouths and small fish flitted. Here the current was swift, unrelenting; a small person caught in it would be tumbled about as she was borne out to sea, would stand no chance of getting to dry land again. How often had I dreamed in terror that that might happen—not to me, but to her, whose outstretched hand always failed to reach my outstretched hand, whose eyes failed to close as waves broke over that last desperate glance passing between us!

Leaning over the water with her, sinking on to one knee, I looked out to sea and my eye was caught by a detail on the surface. At first I thought a bird floated there, yet the object was not a bird. Then I observed that all round it stretched something dark, a stain under the face of the water. Although I knew there was no rock here, certainly no rock so near to the surface—so near that the keel of our skiff in which we often sailed would surely have scraped it—I could only assume the dark patch to be rock, with one spike of it protruding above the water.

In the stillness, I stared at this apparition of rock where no rock had been, watching the swirl of water round it.

My sister's dark straight hair had fallen across her forehead. In her sleep her mouth had opened slightly, revealing the even white line of her teeth and something of her tongue. Her eyes were newly open, her pupils, brown and flecked with gold, regarded me with a remote look. The eyes were wide, deeply, neatly set in the flesh that rolled like pastry over her wide cheekbones. Slowly, she closed her mouth, as if about to form a syllable.

Taking my gaze away from hers, I lowered her so that her feet touched the little extinct volcano shells of barnacles and she could stand, which she did in an absent way, still retaining her left arm about my neck—loosely, and not as if fearing I might push her off our narrow platform.

'Is the town still on fire?' she asked.

All I seemed able to do was to stare down at the clear water by our feet, heaving up and down as if it breathed in sleep. Far up the beach, where the landscape's few colours faded into a universal drab white, a flock of gulls squabbled over something lying among the seawrack.

'Look out there, Bathsheba!' I said, pointing to the shadowy stain under the surface of the waves. 'A whole shelf of rock has come up in the night and is invading our beach.'

She did not look at first. Instead she brought up her right hand for inspection, staring at the little folded fingers and shining nails as if they were items fashioned of a new material.

'It was the earth-tremor, Bathsheba! It's thrown up a whole new continent. We'll be able to scramble over it at low tide.'

She did look then, in a casual bored way, before turning back towards the land. 'The earth must have been throwing up old bits of itself. Perhaps that's Atlantis. Are you

coming to have breakfast?’

‘I’ll come in a little while.’ I felt sulky, just moderately sulky. I stooped down, trying to pry one of the barnacles from its hold until she had gone, running with her arms stretched wide, up the crinkling path towards the old house. Not attending properly to what I was doing, I cut a finger on a sharp ridge of shell. When I squeezed the cut, it bled slightly.

Lying flat on my stomach, I dipped the finger into the water below, watching a spiral of my blood emerge from my body like smoke and vanish into the lungs of the sea. A fancy entered my head that the scent of the blood might summon a monster swimming out of the depths; but nothing I did could alter the impersonal forces at work on the beach.

Similar feelings of powerlessness had once oppressed me greatly—when I was younger, say Bathsheba’s age. I had wanted to make an effect, to leave a mark, to raise some sort of barrier that perhaps would have some duration against time or against the tides. So all one summer, rain or fine, I had laboured to fling up immense barricades in the sand, fortifying them with old timbers until they resembled the trenches that soldiers used to fight in during wars that grandfather talked about. To no avail. Always the sea returned up the beach, lapping its way up the sand in a foolish helpless manner, finally with its off-hand power bowling over my timbers, washing away my cobbles, inundating my ramparts and in all ways fulfilling that horrible prophecy we used to sing about in the psalm: ‘Every valley shall be exalted and every hill shall be razed low.’

Nowadays, I was much more powerful. Many years had passed.

I was hungry. I got to my feet, wrapped my finger in a handkerchief that I gripped in the palm of my hand as if it were a captured lizard, and headed towards breakfast.

Uncle Kenneth was one of the vaguely ill. His great bony structure, like an ancient castle overlooking some particularly damp stretch of the Rhine, was tenanted by numberless spectres: renal calculus, rattling its chains at dead of night; rheumatoid arthritis, flitting sheeted through the passageways; seborrhoea, an apparition like snow; hammer-toe, knocking away in the cellarage; dyspepsia with flatulence, doing its poltergeist best down the galleries; migraine, with its head tucked underneath its arm. These phantoms came and went; Uncle Kenneth crumbled but remained.

He sat at the breakfast table now, behind a barrage of packets, tins and bottles of health foods, powders, laxatives, pills and tonics. His lean jaw cracked over a spoonful of dry brown things.

'The darkest hour is just before the dawn,' he said, looking up at me over his boxes.

I gave the countersign. 'But westward look the land is bright. How are you this morning, Uncle?'

Grandfather, Mrs Gubernater and Bathsheba were already at the table. They kept their eyes down while Uncle Kenneth, flaunting a certain amount of medical knowledge, gave me a resumé of how his hours of agonising night had been spent. I helped myself to porridge.

When the catalogue of woes was over, I said, 'There was a big earthquake in the night, Uncle. The whole house got heaved about, probably into a new dimension.'

'That was me coughing, boy. You heard it in your sleep and thought it was an earthquake.'

'I was awake all night with lumbago,' Grandfather said, 'and I didn't hear anything.'

Uncle Kenneth pointed a spoon at grandfather. 'I don't reckon that's lumbago at all. I reckon it's Friedrich's Ataxia, or something like that.'

'I ought to know what it is, I've got it,' Grandfather

pulled a horrible face across the table, as if to demonstrate what lumbago would look like if you could see it. 'It's got so bad I can't even stand up if I close my eyes.'

'Ah,' said Uncle, closing his eyes. 'That's a hint. And how long have you been staggering a bit as you walk? That's not lumbago—that's *tabes dorsalis*, more likely!'

'What?'

'*Tabes dorsalis* or *locomotor ataxia*. A form of G.P.I.'

While they were arguing, I asked Mrs Gubernater if she would come out in the skiff with Bathsheba and me in the afternoon. Mrs Gubernater had been with the family for a long time but remained plump and rosy through it all. She was no longer young; the roses had become rather a bright red on her cheeks and nose. Three long grey hairs and a short black one sprouted from a mole on her left cheek.

'What have you been up to with Bathsheba this morning, Jeremy?'

'Nothing.'

Mrs Gubernater rose, gathering her skirts with a characteristic gesture, and went to lean in one corner of the breakfast room against the Welsh dresser, piled with its precious china and engraved monumental glasses. I watched her, though it was not what I wished to do. Surely enough, she transposed a wrinkled finger between her eyes and mine and beckoned me with it.

I stood before her.

'I didn't do anything, Gooby. I just took her for a walk, that's all.'

Speaking in a quiet voice so that the three at the table could not hear what she was saying above their passionately renewed discussion of Friedrich's Ataxia, she said, 'You promised me that you would never renew your suicide pact.'

'It wasn't anything like that,' I said with false indignation.

Everything was very dark between us and our conversation was surrounded by white spaces. Her dress moved up and down where she mainly breathed.

Remorselessly, she repeated, 'You promised that you would not turn into a sea creature and if you love me you must keep that promise. You must love me because I am the only human being here. You know that, don't you?'

Fixing my eyes on that part of her which went up and down, I listened for the soft whirr of machinery. As ever, no conclusive findings, one way or another.

Hanging my head, I said, 'I was just taking her for a walk, that's all.'

'You must be strong, Jeremy,' Mrs Gubernater said. 'Remember, it's single combat. Now go and brush your teeth and do the other things and prepare to enjoy your day.'

I had enjoyed the curve of the stairs since they had become curved. Dragging up them, scuffing my toes, I stared out of the tall stained window and saw two men in some sort of ragged uniform running between the cedars on the lawn. They had broken from a slovenly escort and were making for the house. The escort had a quick argument among themselves, threw down their cigarettes, put their rifles to their shoulders and fired. The two men ran on. One of the soldiers in the escort bent down and picked up his cigarette, drawing on it again. The others fired once or twice more. One of the escapers was hit. He staggered a few yards and fell against the trunk of a tree. His companion disappeared beyond the west wing of the house. I went on upstairs; they liked to keep me reminded.

In some incomprehensible way, Uncle Kenneth was pottering about the upper landing. Perhaps a new short-cut had developed in the house; there would be some 'plausible explanation'. Uncle carried a small enamel bowl, together with a short metal tube ending in a plastic bulb—some

piece of medical equipment necessary to his health, I supposed.

He turned the old dog-fang-yellow smile on me, as ever with his air of having been caught doing something he should not have been, and said, 'So there you are, Jeremy! I've got a riddle for you, my lad. I'm going to tell you six things which were given as answers to a question, all right? And you've got to guess what the question was. All right? Six things that were given as answers to one question. What was the question?'

As he spoke, pointing the tube at me, he shuffled backwards along the passage, towards the bathroom door. From where I stood, I could see into the bathroom. A woman dressed all in black, wearing a black hat, was raising the blind. I had never seen her before and would never see her again. (I hated that kind of thing, as well they knew.)

'Macbeth. Jazz. God's creatures. Christ's life. Spring. Science.'

He looked at me from behind the dog's fangs, clutching his chest and saying 'Pardon' as it rumbled. I had long ago placed Uncle as one of the enemy; the whole aspect of caricature was too ridiculous. And yet were they not subtle enough even to flaunt being too ridiculous? Perhaps this poor broken reed was the only person with me in the house. Either way, I could never trust him.

'Wyndham,' I said, maliciously.

'That's unkind, and it's not a question, dear boy.'

'Well, where is Wyndham, then?'

Dog's fangs, and his yellowing hand going back and clutching the bathroom doorknob. The answer is, "What begins with love and ends with murder?" Funny, isn't it?"

He disappeared into the room, and closed the door behind him. I had to admit that I liked the idea of an answer being a question. It was part of the rules of single combat, and of life.

In my bedroom, I seized a pillow and sprawled on the floor by the windowseat. Idly, I took a book from the shelf under the windowseat, clutching it to me without opening it, almost certain of what I would read within its pages: they weren't that clever and, over the years, some of their tricks had become predictable. (When they all became predictable, would I have won? Was winning even possible?)

The book was entitled *The Boys' Book of Being*. I was supposed to have had it a long time, since, after the title on the title-page, a childish hand had scribbled in blue crayon the word *Sick*. The writing looked centuries old.

Opening the book at random, smiling in enjoyment of my cleverness, I read:

Axiom 241. Always feel sympathy, particularly towards the weak.

Jolly old Uncle Ken had only a short while to live, yet he never let his cheerfulness desert him. After a particularly trying night, he met his ungrateful young nephew, Billie, on the landing. Since his own son, Windy, had disappeared, Uncle Ken had treated Billie like a son. Yet his smiles brought no answering smile from Billie, which made the old man very sad.

Now he asked the young fellow a riddle he had devised during the long painracked hours of the night. Billie could not guess it.

All riddles are about communication. Once it was believed that only lucid things could and should be communicated, but this has since proved incorrect.

Billie said something which hurt his poor old uncle greatly. The old man retreated into a private room and wept bitter tears. He wished to win the young boy's love and trust. Little did either of them know that only another week's life was left to the boy. A terrible accident awaited in the near future.

I threw the book down, laughing. Tomorrow, a different piece of nonsense would have materialised in the book.

The door opened slowly. I tensed myself, ready for an unpleasant surprise, but it was only Bathsheba.

'I'm glad it's only you,' she said. (By such means, the enemy sought to deceive me it was human.) 'Let's go out while Gooby and grandfather are busy downstairs and Uncle Gilroy is locked in the bathroom.'

'You mean Uncle Ken?' I asked.

She looked all crafty at me and began to laugh in a panting way.

'Don't play that game with me,' she said. 'You know it scares me. Besides, there's no Uncle Ken. I'm not that silly.'

Just for a moment, she must have seen something in my eyes that really frightened her. Then she bit her lower lip and pulled up her socks and came towards me in a determined fashion. Again I thought about hypnotising her and ordering her to fly—but whatever she was, she was the thing closest to me. Pointing imperiously, I made her stand in front of me.

'I'm going to ask you a riddle, Bathsheba.'

'The answer's a question, isn't it?'

'No, it's not that riddle, and how did you know about that one, anyway?'

'Because—because I heard Uncle Gilroy ask it you on the landing.'

'You sweet little girl, how you lie! Listen, this riddle is about me. There's a perfectly square featureless room—a cell, in fact. Just four corners and an even stone floor. A ping-pong ball is trapped in the room and cannot escape. It is continually pursued by a big heavy lead ball, many times its own size, which wishes to crush it. The ping-pong ball (that's me) has to keep on running, but it cannot climb the walls or fly through the air. How does it escape being crushed?'

Bathsheba sat down before me in a little heap, cradled her elbow, sucked her thumb.

'Does it get on top of the big heavy lead ball?'

'No, it can't.'

'Uhhhh ... does it find the big heavy lead ball is hollow and climb inside?'

'No, it can't do that either. Give up?'

'If the room got flooded with water, then it could float safely while the big heavy lead ball sank and was drowned.'

'That's not the answer either. Give up?'

'Yes. How does it escape being crushed?'

I stuck my tongue out at her. 'Tell you later. First we're going out to discover what the soldiers are doing in the grounds. I'll say that about you—you always have something going on to interest me.'

'First, tell me how the ping-pong ball escapes being crushed by the big heavy lead ball.'

'You come along with me. Bathsheba, before you turn into a monster.' I seized her wrist and led her from the room.

Outside my bedroom, the old house reverted to its secondary appearance, a cavernous, semi-ruinous structure presumably built by a well-meaning but cranky environmentalist. It was draughty and uncomfortable, but I had grown to like it: it appeared whenever I had scored a minor victory, as I had over Bathsheba, indicating that the enemy scarcely realised when it was showing pique.

Beyond the plate windows I saw that the old seaplane base had materialised. Disused hangars hung over the grey waters of the lake. Between the great squares of concrete, sorrel and grass grew rusty and scrub flourished beyond them.

'Oh, oh, Environment Two!'

'It's nothing but reassuring. You people can only manage

the two switches of surroundings. All your transformations are very limited. I sometimes feel as if I'm caught in a very technically limited life-size version of an electronic game. And since I know this is not technics but psychonics, I understand how limited your mind is despite its undoubted strength.'

'Don't say "your", Jeremy. "Their" or "its". I'm on your side, just like uncle and grandfather and Mrs Gubernater. Really. Haven't you tested us enough to see that? I'm a ping-pong ball like you. If you can accept that, then the big heavy lead ball may not crush either of us.'

'Whether or not you're part of the big heavy lead ball——' I had been going to add 'is immaterial'; more deviously, I said—'it must represent the projection of the psyche of an entire planetary biomass, human and animal and everything. And it has beamed itself right down on mankind on Earth. Where I have to fight it in single combat.'

'Jeremy, you should hear how silly that sounds. Why would that happen?'

'I don't know why—or much care. But it's how things are, as even Gubernater admits in weak moments. Mankind has become stagnant for millions of years, in a kind of everlasting utopia, and this challenge by the big heavy lead ball has caught it unaware. So I have been thrown into the arena to fight.'

She cringed away from me.

'You haven't told me that story for years. I thought you'd forgotten that crazy paranoid theory. I don't like that one. You know I'm a qualified mind-healer.'

I smiled as nastily, twistedly, as I could, raising my hands like claws to either side of my ears. 'Another error in psychology. If you really thought me paranoid, it would be the last thing you would say to me!'

She slipped away, her arms stretched, dancing. I let her

go. I was profoundly sorry for her. I loved her. Love thy enemy. Back in the Middle Ages of the Old Western Culture, legal proceedings had been taken against animals. Ideas of responsibility changed over the epochs. Human and animal nature also changed.

Outside, it was green all about the gaunt building. The very air was green. The carefully sited trees had grown with neglect, were pompous and heavy and thick like haystacks with foliage. I walked under them, looking for soldiers, stepping out on to the exposed ground of the sea-plane ramps. From here, men and sea creatures had once soared under their own power to the very margins of space. Now all was deserted. Walking along the concrete by the water's edge, I heard my footsteps echo against the façade of the hangars.

One hangar was slightly open.

I walked in. A desk stood in the middle of the emptiness with a cup of coffee steaming on it. I went over, sat down, sipped at the coffee.

There was a typewriter on the desk. When I slipped a sheet of paper into it, it typed out the letter I dictated.

Dear Bathsheba,

The ping-pong ball simply kept to the walls. Then it could run round and round the whole room for ever, and the big heavy lead ball could not crush it.

I want you to remember this lesson when I am dead and gone. Or when you are dead and gone. Such things do happen.

Lovingly,

Jeremy

Taking the paper out, I folded it neatly in four and dropped it on the pitted concrete floor. It would reach its destination; I was in a universe where no action ever went astray.

Outside, the sun lay folded into the ragged squares of the old runway. Our usual building had come back. Rocks sat on the fake battlements. Some things had to be eternally re-enacted, like death. There were no truths unless they were eternally remembered. I said to the soldier who staggered dying at my feet, 'All that really interests me is truth. Pretences and deceptions are my toys, my favourite toys.'

He rolled over, groaning.

It was Uncle Gilroy.

I bent over him. It was impossible not to be moved by his look of agony, as he crushed the rusty sorrel under him.

'They're coming, Jeremy,' he gasped. 'The enemy. There's been a revolution. The earthquake destroyed the central world communication system. They'll be here in force soon ... Never mind me, get into the house, as fast as you can.'

Kneeling beside him, feeling his pulse, I whispered into his ear, 'Don't worry uncle. It's only a game. You'll be back tomorrow.'

I ran towards the house without looking round.

Slipping into one of the rear doors, I bolted it behind me. Silence filled the house. As I tiptoed along the corridor, I heard voices at the far end and proceeded even more carefully.

My sister was in the kitchen, talking to Mrs Gubernater and grandfather. I paused by the door, listening. Of course they would be talking about me.

'His current obsession is that we are all manifestations of some interstellar entity which is engaged in single combat with him.'

'What nonsense!' said Mrs Gubernater stoutly. 'Now, mind out the way while I put these rock-buns in the oven. And why should they pick on him, of all people?'

'There could be something in his theory, though,' grand-

father said in his creaky voice, 'Single combat has an honourable tradition, and not only in boyhood games, you know. There's plenty of precedent for it as a substitute for battle and war.'

'Please, not a lecture, grandfather,' Bathsheba said, but he continued with scarcely a pause.

'Long, long ago, when the Vandals were at war with the Alemans of Spain, the hostile parties decided to have their conflict settled by a single combat. They considered it as an appropriate substitute for war, a concise proof of the superiority of one party over the other, in which victory proved the support of gods and justice. Even very early on, there's the case of the Merovingian king Theoderich at Quierzt on the Oise, where his warriors said, "Better for one to fall than the whole army." And there's the more recent case of China settling its war against the Indo-Pak States with single combat, and retiring from much occupied territory when their man proved the loser. I'd imagine that single combat might well prove the only way of waging interstellar warfare, at least between two civilised planets.'

I could not help laughing. As I walked into the kitchen, expressions of astonishment registered on their faces, to be followed in Mrs Gubernater's case by one of anger.

'Little boys who eavesdrop never hear good of themselves. If you don't behave yourself better, Master Jeremy, you'll get no rock-buns for your tea.'

'The rock-buns are just a minor part of the day's score in the silly old electronic game, Gooby.' All the same, I liked Mrs Gubernater's rock-buns. 'But I couldn't help hearing what grandfather said. Will you tell me about the Vandals some time, grandfather?'

'Of course, my boy. I'll tell you about them this evening, at bedtime.'

When I slipped out of the kitchen, Bathsheba followed me, clutching at my hand.

'Promise you won't turn into a monster, Jeremy?'

'I am trying to but I can't because I've just swallowed one of the enemy's enchanted antimorphosis rock-buns.'

'Ha ha. I'm still mad at you because you wouldn't tell me the answer to that riddle about the ping-pong ball.'

As we raced up the main staircase, I said, 'It's not a proper riddle—you could easily work it out for yourself if your powers of visualisation were as good as mine. That's all it needs—visualisation.' I lowered my voice because we were passing the suit of armour standing on the first landing. It could hear everything. Grandfather used to collect armour, thousands of years ago. This suit stalked the house at midnight. 'In any case, General, that's irrelevant now. The Sioux are surrounding the ranch and we've got to hold out until the sheriff and his men get here.'

She gave me one of her sly looks. 'I can't keep up this pace, by the way. This poisoned arrow wound in my leg is still agony.'

'We'll probably have to cut the whole leg off.'

'I expect so. In hand to hand combat, I can hit the Indians with it, like a club.'

We climbed the narrow stair that led to the battlements. I pushed the door open. The prairie grass was high; herds of buffalo filled the distant horizon.

We crawled forward on hands and knees. I whispered, 'Truth is so precious that it always comes attended by a bodyguard of lies.'

'Mother may be coming to see us next month.'

At the battlements, I raised my head, squinting along the barrel of my shotgun.

'Smoke signals!' Bathsheba whispered beside me.

'Worse than that—the Vandals, and they're invading in force.'

They were mustering on the hill, under the cedars. Hard little leather-clad men in helmets, with great swords

glinting at their sides. They rode ponies, adorned with antlers to make them look more ferocious. A whole army was gathering for the attack on our castle, the last bastion of the Roman world.

'This will be a bloody day,' I said grimly.

At least I knew that, despite the big heavy ball of time which we immortals rolled before us, I had thousands of golden centuries of childhood left to enjoy.

READ ME THIS RIDDLE

by

E. C. Tubb

Tall tales of the spaceways—yes, they will be told, one day, in one or another of the glittering futures. Probably there will be many versions of the stories circulating among the stars. In circumstances like those visualised herein by E. C. Tubb men will talk over their experiences along the space lanes and on the wild and alien planets of the galaxy. In the Library on Nyoka, though, the truth that each book is a self-contained world brought more of paradox than of comfort to space-wrecked survivors.

READ ME THIS RIDDLE

FRAMED in the jagged circle of brown and scabrous rock the vista of the plain was one of cold hostility. Grey-whiteness tinged with blue stretched to either side like the frozen surface of an ocean. Ahead rested the mound of enigmatic ruins, a castle slumped and chilled to be crusted by ash, to add to the brooding stillness of the place. To lie dreaming beneath the shroud of light thrown by distant stars.

A fantasy. There was no proof that the mound was a ruin or, if it was, that it had ever held any form of life remotely human. This was an alien world. It could be an alien grave.

Turning, Elgan looked into the interior of the cave. Those seated around the fire, despite their appearance, were victors. They had survived to walk from the wrecked vessel, to find shelter, to obtain warmth, to wait with the patience of resignation for the rescue which might or might not come. And, waiting, they talked.

'A bad world,' said Legrand. 'Bleak and cold. It's bad enough to starve when it's warm. I hate the cold.'

'Me too.' Hengist held his hands to the fire, the glow painting his face with dancing colours, accentuating the hollows of his sunken cheeks. 'It reminds me of the time I was stranded on Accua. No money, no job, nothing to hope for. It was cold then too and we lost five of our number.'

'You weren't alone?' This from Connor, young, once brash, once a little stupid, but who had learned that he needed to learn.

'I'd hooked up with a bunch of others,' said Hengist shortly. 'It was the only way to survive.'

Shared fires, shared food, shared beds. A shared misery, the sharing alone making it bearable. But not a shared escape and even Connor knew better than to probe. Some victories came hard.

To change the subject he said, 'Those ruins, if they are ruins, do you think we could find anything?'

'Maybe.' Kalend added another scrap of dried moss to the fire, handling the fuel as if it were gold. 'You've studied the terrain, Elgan. What do you think?'

'The ground is soft, like ash. To cover it will take equipment we haven't got.'

'We could fix something from the wreck.' Connor was stubborn. 'Snowshoes or skis. A sled, even. We could do it.'

'Sure, and if we could we might find something we'd regret,' said Pontiac, dryly. Old, he shivered and drew closer to the fire. 'Like Greeson on Yefare. He found a vault and went inside to find valuables.'

'And?'

'What was waiting inside found food.' Pontiac grinned at Connor. 'Red meat just to its liking. We got to it just as it was starting on the head. That we buried—the rest had gone.'

'Or Houghton,' said Legrand, thoughtfully. 'I shipped with him once. He took one chance too many on Chao, I think. There was talk of a fabulous bloom to be found in the swamps and he went after it. He found it too and brought it back with him—growing in his lungs.'

'Accidents.' Hengist shrugged. 'Things like that can happen to anyone at any time. One risk taken too many. A gamble lost—hell, we're in the same position. But what of

the other things?'

The rumours, the fables and legends, the whispers which survived despite all logic. A mysterious vessel filled with incredible treasure which drifted eternally between the stars. A planet which gave eternal youth. A machine with which a man could obtain his heart's desire. A woman, immortal, lovely beyond description, who waited patiently to be rescued and who would give the man who freed her all he would need for ever.

Dreams born of aching frustration, tales spun from gossamer, sagas built on fancies and embroidered by imagination. Stories which should have been true and one, at least, which was.

Pontiac said, 'Elgan, tell us about John Forester.'

He was fifty-eight years old with veins beginning to show prominently in his legs, his eyes far from strong and his drives well on the wane. Dissipation had lost its attraction, women were a nuisance, effort was a penance and when his stomach revolted so that he could no longer enjoy food and drink he decided that he'd had enough. Not of living, he was not insane, but of pretending to enjoy what life had to offer in the objective world. For such a man there was, fortunately, an answer.

On Nyoka he found it.

'The Library,' said Pontiac. 'I've heard of it.'

'It exists?' Connor echoed his incredulity. 'It's real?'

'It's real,' said Elgan. 'But sometimes it's hard to find.'

There was a shimmer about it, a vague intangibility as if it had just passed the barrier between dimensions and, like an echo, still lingered in the one it had left. A building shaped like a domed cylinder, the walls pierced with a single door, the area beyond hushed as if emulating a cathedral. A hush broken by the soft tinkle of crystal chimes which moved in the warm and scented air to throw deli-

cate music in greeting to the newcomer.

A greeting put into words by the attendant who rose from where he sat.

'John Forester, you are welcome.'

'You know me?'

'As I know many other things; the seven colours of a rainbow, the nine sounds of the Elgash Bells, the fifteen signs of the Ghalatian Greeting.' The attendant was small and smelt a little of dust and, as he rose from his bow, the lines of his face resembled the rifled leaves of a book. 'But you are not here to ask questions.'

'No,' admitted Forester. 'I came——'

'The fact that you are here is explanation enough. A man follows his need. Enter, then, and be not afraid.'

A smaller door gaped beyond the main portal, the panel swinging wide as Forester approached, closing behind him as he stepped into an area deceptively small, padded, dully illuminated by glowing panels. Around him rose a host of bubbles in kaleidoscopic brilliance; trapped rainbows which swirled invitingly, luring with their suggestive contents.

His hand closed on one.

It exploded with a gush of scintillation.

The world changed.

He sat in a low-roofed space, hands on an oar, feeling the pain of wood-torn thighs and buttocks ripe with oozing sores. The beat of a mallet was the pound of a relentless heart, the air a nauseous stench, the light a dull yellow glow from wicks burning in rancid oil. In the guttering flames he could see the back of the man seated before him, the spine ridged and knobbed with prominent bone, the flesh streaked by a criss-cross of shallow gashes. Lank hair held creeping vermin. The naked buttocks were stacked thick with dried excreta. Crusted sores showed beneath the manacles clamping the ankles, the iron clasps and chain

rusted with urine.

A galley—and he was a slave!

A beat and the oar moved as if with a life of its own, automatic reflex obeying the command, habit following the pattern. Lift, pull, lower, push, lift, pull, lower, push, lift ...

He felt the pull and bunch of aching muscles in arms, back and shoulders, the tension of his thighs, feet pressing hard against the deck. The world was filled with the thudding beat, the weight of the oar, the creak of timbers, the stench of men. He was nothing. Flesh wedded to wood to form a machine.

Looking down he saw his thighs, his knees, his shins. Dirt crusted the skin and lice reigned in his hair. From the shadows beneath the bench before him he caught the gleaming eyes of a rat. His ears were filled with the sobbing exhalations of someone driven to the edge of exhaustion.

'Move!'

He reared as the whip lashed across his shoulders, the thong biting, cutting, ripping through skin with the sting of fire. A blow delivered with the impersonal chill of a rider touching a spur to the flank of his mount.

'Keep time there! Keep time!'

A second blow which crossed the first and sent waves of red agony through every nerve causing him to cringe even as he threw his weight against the oar. A third and the overseer moved on to send his lash against the spine of the man in front, red droplets springing to dapple the filthy skin, the slimed deck.

An eternity later they paused to rest and eat; hard bread which was torture to scurvied gums, a bowl of tepid stew made from garbage, a measure of brackish water. Then again the beat ... the beat ... the beat ... the beat ...

How long, in God's name, was he to serve at an oar?

Kalend blew on the fire and fed it a scrap of fuel. As he straightened he said, 'Well, how long was it?'

'Years,' said Elgan. 'Subjective, naturally, but real enough to Forester. And he couldn't escape by dying don't forget, the book didn't provide for that.'

'The book?'

'It was the Library,' said Elgan patiently. 'What else would it be but a book?'

Connor wasn't satisfied. 'A thing you read?'

'Read, imagine, taste, experience—what does it matter? A book is a self-contained world. Forester was in such a world. He was experiencing the life of the main character. He had become the main character. But, for him there could be no short cuts, no skipping.'

'And no way out,' mused Legrand. 'Unless——?'

'Unless he closed the book.'

He did it by closing his eyes and smashing his head against the oar. In the momentary confusion when, half-stunned, reality changed and firm contours became blurred, he grasped desperately at a drifting bubble of lambent blue and squeezed it and became engulfed by a shimmering haze and suddenly found himself—elsewhere.

In a vast and solemn chamber built of gigantic blocks of stone and filled with shadows which swelled into ominous proportions, to dwindle as men walked past the flambeaux to halt and stand before him.

'For the third and last time we appeal to you to recant and yield your heretical ways and return to the forgiving and all-embracing body of Mother Church there to have your sins washed from your soul and the hope of joy eternal restored. How say you, man? Will you not be humble before your God?'

'Before my God, yes. Before you servants of Hell, never!'

The voice which should have been a shout was a whis-

per, the defiance which should have rung to the far corners of the world barely reached the ears of the hooded men standing before where he was bound, but they had travelled far enough to ensure his damnation.

A gesture and the servants of the Inquisition were at his side. Men like beasts with masked faces and naked torsos; picked for lack of imagination and unquestioning obedience. Releasing his bonds they held him firm as a cowed figure lifted a hand and intoned the will of the Holy Office.

Not to kill but to save. To torment the flesh in order to gain the soul. To open wide the doors of Heaven for the misguided heretic who would be accepted into Grace as soon as he confessed the grievous error of his ways. An act justified before God and Man. Against salvation what was a little pain?

'Recant and be blessed, my son. God is all-merciful. Accept for forgiveness. Renounce your heresy.' A sigh like the stirring of wind-blown leaves. 'The Devil makes his servants stubborn. Proceed.'

First the rack which pulled and pulled until his limbs eased from their sockets and the sound of his screaming echoed from the vaulted roof of the chamber. Then fire which blotched his chest and stomach with seared and crisped skin through which melted fat oozed and bubbled to form individual places of torment. Places joined by the fires induced into his left foot as it was crushed in an iron boot. By the agony of his right as the nails were ripped slowly from each toe.

'Mother of God have mercy on me! Dear God protect me! Sweet Jesus save me! In the name of all the Saints and Holy Martyrs save me from this agony!'

A babble of sound which echoed like the tongueless mewling of a distraught animal caught and flayed alive for the added lustre of its pelt.

And then the hoist.

Crippled, unable to stand, he was carried beneath a crossbar. His wrists were lashed behind him, a rope affixed which was thrown over the bar to be caught and held fast by two burly men. Together they hauled, lifting the bound wrists, the arms, the body itself to hang suspended. Up and up, to pause, to release the rope, to catch it as the body fell, to halt the falling shape with a savage jerk.

His shriek was the distillation of agony.

Again, a little higher this time, the fall a little longer, the jerk at his shoulders all the more savage. Tendons and sinews yielded beneath the strain. Bone started from weakened sockets to yield finally as again he fell to be jerked to a halt.

To hang with wrists upraised above his head, his shoulders ruined, the arms ripped and torn from their natural position to hold him suspended by skin and muscle only.

Ruined arms. Hands which never again would be able to grasp a thing as light as a feather. Elbows which would never bend. Biceps which would never flex. Crippled and worse than crippled he would hang until he died.

'Did he?' Connor blew on his hands and held them to the fire. 'Die, I mean.'

'A hell of a way to go,' mused Legrand. 'I've seen a man burned and roasting and another with his skin dissolved in acid; but they were accidents. What makes a man accept such torment?'

'The book,' reminded Pontiac. 'It was all in the book. Once he'd started the story he had to follow it through to the end.'

'Unless he closed it.' Hengist frowned, thinking. 'Maybe he liked the yarn,' he said. 'It could be that he enjoyed it. There are men like that.'

Too many men who found pleasure in the depiction of pain and who would linger lovingly over the portrayal of

man's inhumanity to man. Violence held a primitive appeal which could not be denied. And yet, for a man to suffer such horror when, by a simple act, he could escape?

'Forester was caught,' said Kalend with acute understanding. 'Once in he couldn't get out or couldn't think clearly enough to change his situation. But later?'

'He managed,' said Elgan. He hunched a little closer to the fire, conscious of the keening of wind beyond the cave, fitful gusts which caught the air and swirled it so that the little flames danced and guttered as if with a life of their own. 'And not all the experiences were bad.'

A bubble of purple yielded a vision of scented delight locked in the harmonious gem of a room high in a palace of dreams. Her perfume was of musk and roses, her eyes the limpid pools of northern waters warmed to a liquid softness by the flames of unslaked desire. A cloud wreathed the sculpted perfection of her face; one of spun gold with strands as fine as gossamer, a mist of delicate and fragrant hair which hung like a shimmering waterfall over the smooth enticement of her shoulders. Her lips were a couch of embracing warmth. Her feet were the wings of butterflies each toe tipped with red.

'I love you!' she whispered. 'My darling, I love you!'

And he took her into his arms as a man does a woman and even while searching the innermost places he felt his desire rise like a phoenix from the ashes of past achievement.

'My lord,' she whispered. 'My master. Take me, use me, treat me as you will. I am yours to command.'

Her perfume was a cloud of stimulating vapour. Through the narrow window streamers of sunlight touched drapes of silken gold, russet, amber, yellow, purple, reds like the sheen of freshly crushed strawberries, blues like the segments of compressed skies. Here the throb of life was

paramount, the act of creation supreme to all other considerations, the old, old and ancient ritual a thing which filled the world.

Which muffled the sound of footsteps and the clash of the opening door.

A clash echoed by the impact of steel as, rising, he snatched up a sword and, over the prostrate body of the girl, fought for his life and the love he had gained.

A bold fight and one which sent the blood gushing through his veins, more flying to spatter the walls as hands fell from severed wrists, heads from shorn trunks, fountains gushing from opened throats. On his feet now he roared his war-cry and, dimly, heard it repeated from the streets far below. Again, and it was louder, yelled from the throats of men climbing the stairs to this room in a tower, echoed by the fury of those caught and dying beneath their steel.

The victory was sweet, and another bubble showered him with scintillant shards of splintered silver and he was alone crossing an endless waste of snow with the loom of a sombre mountain far ahead and the grim, slinking shapes of wolves howling from behind.

And another of ruby which took him to a cavern beneath a sea where sportive fish swam in graceful pavannes where he suffered the embrace of constricting tentacles as a jewelled mermaid held his face between her breasts.

And a bubble of lavender and another of cerise and more of topaz and magenta and cyan and each a new experience.

'What happened?' demanded Connor. 'In the end, what happened?'

'In the end?' Elgan shrugged. 'Forester died.'

'Again? But how——'

'Really died.' Elgan was patient. 'The kind of death a man can know only once. He was greedy, a child given a

candy-store, and he didn't know when to stop. And he was old and even subjective experience takes its toll. Or, perhaps——' He broke off, then shook his head. 'No. That doesn't matter. But Forester died.'

'In the Library found on Nyoka,' said Pontiac and his voice was sombre. 'Well, he found what he had gone there to seek. Let him rest in peace.'

'Amen,' said Kalend and threw more fuel on the dying eye of the fire. For a moment it threatened to quench the glow then, as the flames won and began to feed, bright tongues of red and orange rose to turn their faces into the masks of devils.

And, looking at them, Connor could understand why Forester had known so much pain and suffered so many tortures. The devil lies close to the surface of us all and what we are cannot be denied. And yet something troubled him, the thought that of all the entertainment the Library had to offer, the man had chosen such earthy, elemental things.

'He had no choice,' said Elgan when he mentioned it. 'He was driven by his nature as are we all. The Library provided what he needed.'

'Books,' said Connor. 'You said the bubbles were like books. A man can choose what he cares to read.'

'An analogy,' said Elgan. 'And not a good one. It must not be taken too literally.'

He rose with a sudden motion and stepped towards the opening of the cave there to stand leaning with his shoulder against the stone, his face out-turned, the freshening wind stirring his hair.

A cold wind gusted which stung his ears and eyes and filled them with moisture as it numbed the flesh of face and hands.

Watching him Connor wondered why he had left the comfort of the fire and sought the answer in the eyes of

the others; but none would meet his questioning stare. They sat silent and still like images of stone, the firelight turning their eyes into mirrors of reflected radiance, their features into engraved masks behind which the soul sat and cringed to the onset of anticipated disaster. The tale of John Forester, perhaps, the telling of it had cast a chill over the assembly, one Connor thought to vanquish with a laugh.

'A good story,' he said, 'and Elgan told it well, but surely you can all see the fallacy? How did he know what Forester experienced? How did he know the man died?'

Pontiac said, like the whispering rustle of seared and fallen leaves, 'He knows.'

'But how?'

'Ask him—he knows.'

Rising Connor stepped from the circle and felt the cold numb his flesh as he turned his back on the fire. Standing against the rock Elgan made no effort to face him not even when Connor touched him on the arm. His face, touched now with frost, cold in the reflected glow of starlight, seemed remote and, somehow, inhuman.

'It was a joke,' said Connor. 'Admit it was a joke.'

'The story?'

'Yes. John Forester never existed. There was no Library on Nyoka. No kaleidoscope of bubbles each, when burst, giving a new experience. It was just something you made up in order to pass the time.'

And, even as he said it, he wanted it to be so.

'No,' said Elgan. 'It was no joke.'

'But——'

'John Forester existed and there is a planet called Nyoka and on it can be found the Library guarded by a strange attendant and in it can be found all the hells and paradises imagined by Man. Worlds of the imagination which can be

found and lived and known to the full as their creators intended.'

'You can't know that,' insisted Connor. 'You can't be sure.'

'I'm sure.' Elgan straightened from where he leaned against the rock and turned to meet the other's eyes. 'You see I was with Forester when he found the Library. I saw him pass inside. I followed. I know what happened to him because it happened to me and ... and ...'

'You left,' said Connor, quickly. 'Of course, you had to leave, how else would you be here?'

'If I left I can't remember it,' said Elgan, bleakly. 'All I remember is a host of bubbles each providing a new world. As far as I know I am still among them. Tell me, Connor, did I leave—or am I still inside?'

He turned and looked from the cave at the grey-whiteness of the ash-like stuff beyond. It had lain a score of feet from the edge of the cave when they had entered it—now it rested barely an inch below the floor.

And it was still rising.

MY SISTER MARGARITE

by

CHRIS MORGAN

The it-world holds discos and coffee bars and Soho as well as Highbury and Finsbury Park. The real world, of course, held the Demon King and Baal and mind-power and the spidery minions of horror breaking down the failing fastnesses. The if-world holds Pearl and the real world held Margarite, the Child of Light. The important fact that Zack—or Zachary—had to hold on to in both worlds was that magic was old-fashioned and outmoded, as Pearl showed him and Margarite, also. But, there was no denying, Zack had an amusingly effective way of dealing with a right uppercut.

MY SISTER MARGARITE

ONE

ALL ABOUT him the if-world shimmers, inanimate objects writhing ghostlike at the periphery of vision. Surroundings are smudged and blurred, like a watercolour with too much water. Zachary Goulde stays on at his office desk after the others' departure, thinking, dreaming of Pearl. He is twentyish, slim, just less than average height. The long hair and Zapata moustache are black. Stylishly dressed he is, as if to the model born (wide trousers, wide tie, high-heeled platform shoes). Sitting, still trying to believe it: 'Why, yes, Zack. I'd love to.'

An hour earlier: in a fit of unaccustomed bravado, fingers crossed but tongue not tied for once, 'Er, why don't you let me take you to the cinema tomorrow evening?' The well-rehearsed words, practised before a mirror.

'Why, yes, Zack. I'd love to.' Smiling like a toothpaste ad. A faint blush in her cheeks. (Reflecting his own pinkness? Is she a little embarrassed too, with the other girls around to hear and maybe gossip about it?) So quickly, so smoothly, a time and place are fixed. ('I hope you'll enjoy the film, Pearl. It's Bunuel—he's a great director.'—'I'm sure I shall.') A sweet, friendly smile—never patronising, never laughing at him. She hardly comes up to his shoulder, can't be over five feet. Sylph-like, almost boyish, she is, with

brown hair no longer than his, very white skin, a sharply-cut pixyish face, large eyes of brown. And the corpse of Friday afternoon is unfrozen, resuscitated—even healthily bronzed—by the sunshine of her smile.

But he cannot say more for the masque of shyness which rides him again—an unwilling horse—calcifying his tongue and liquidising his legs. At five he sits tight, till shuffling out-of-focus invoices, not daring to look up as other desks are cleared and people stand stretching and chattering—exchanging the ritual end-of-week inanities. The tide of noise grows, washes over him, recedes.

Now Zachary is alone except for Mr Partridge, the departmental manager: a dark blob behind frosted glass, grunting into the telephone. He tries to arrange his troubled thoughts. He has made a date with Pearl after weeks of silent adoration. It's what he wants, but is it what he *should* want? Has he already chained himself to this if-world of his own creation, made himself a part of its shadowy insubstantiality, through this incipient relationship with one of its inhabitants? He shifts unsteadily in his swivel-chair. But the real-world is still so close, so similar, so different . . .

He has intended to allow all the others—including Pearl—ten minutes to disperse among the rush-hour hordes before he leaves, but intentions move so much faster than the hands of his watch that by five minutes after the hour he can bear to wait no longer. Swiftly he packs up, grabs the carrier-bag of lunch-time shopping and steps out into the corridor.

Crimson brightness stabs into his eyes like quick knives, dazzling, startling. He peers through nearly-closed lids at the sun—blood-red, large and hazy, hanging like a ruby pendant between two tower blocks, not far above the lurex gown of the river. Stepping towards the corridor window, he gazes out, thinking how beautiful the if-world can

be when it really tries. (Fifteen stories down, the London traffic rumbles and hoots in shadow.) He leans against the sill to watch that glowing orb lay golden figures of benediction upon the river as it dips to the south-west. It can only be a sign.

In the disappearing sun Zachary sees luck, good fortune. It cheers him, helping to banish his doubt, his unease, and he smiles. Turning, he chases his own stilt-legged shadow to the lifts, down a corridor still faintly suffused with red.

As he strides and jinks his way along overcrowded pavements he keeps thinking, *She said yes, she said yes, I asked Pearl and she said yes.* It becomes an atonal chant; he nods his head to its beat as he goes. He ignores the crowds pressing against him, is oblivious to the traffic's carbon-monoxide halitosis. There are incalculably large numbers of these people existing in the if-world, but eighteen months of visits here have accustomed him to their continual choking presence.

In the Underground train he sits grinning at his reflection in the compartment window and imagining Pearl's small hand in his. Walking through early dusk, past the smokey-bricked rows of terraced Highbury houses—swirling into the less regular but more familiar rounded shapes of the real-world when he looks at them out of the corner of his eye—which lead to his tiny bed-sitter, he steps lightly and is beginning to feel almost intoxicated by his success with Pearl, by his greatest success with a girl so far. Anticipations of Saturday evening run riot in his mind. His normal if-world hesitancy is stifled and he needs to restrain himself consciously from dancing around each street-lamp en route. He is not inhibited so much at the prospect of making a fool of himself as by a fear of putting the lamps out of action, or even of causing them to vanish. Although his powers are so much weaker here in the if-world he has always shied away from changing any part of it, has always

tried to slide unnoticed through its semi-ethereal existence.

Still clutching his bright plastic carrier-bag, he runs up the apartment house's forty-three stairs and unlocks the door to his room. The very fact of maintaining a room in the if-world can be interpreted as a belief in its reality. By establishing a foothold like this he is, in some way, becoming a part of the if-world, rather than *it* being a part of *him*. Yet he needs an address for mail, to afford him some sort of patina of respectability, to enable him to hold down the job. Besides, it is a convenient and private spot from which to make the transition. He has been caught in the snare of necessity. In a linked chain of necessities.

Zachary peels off the flared-trousered business suit, exchanging it for his leathers and wishing all the while that life could grow simpler for a change. To take Pearl with him into the real-world and stop immersing himself daily in this weird dream: that, itself, is the stuff of day-dreams. He unlocks a drawer and lifts out his tray of amulets and talismans. First the composite Earth-mother symbol—heavy siderite on a silver chain—to encircle his waist. Next a phylactery, which he clips to his right arm. Then a small red bag of cross-stone to hang around his neck. He finishes with rings of amber and jade—they slide on to his long, musical fingers of their own magical volition. *Protected*. Finally he draws the black, rune-studded cloak around his shoulders; it reacts to his body, swirling for a moment then settling obediently, just stroking his calves with its hem.

He is ready.

Now he forces himself not to think of Pearl, and to forsake the if-world in his mind at least. He tucks the carrier-bag under his arm and stands in the middle of the small room, calming himself for transition. Then he is off: spinning round (three times widdershins, three times deosil), muttering the words under his breath, scattering a little

powder about him as he moves, leaping into the air on the last syllable and ...

... he landed on a hard, bare surface in complete darkness. Unmoving, scarcely breathing, he tried to become a statue, as one with the stone beneath his feet. He listened, sniffed the air, felt with his mind. Very slowly he widened his sphere of perception, alert for anything out of the ordinary, for any hint of danger. Not that most of the real-world inhabitants posed a threat—not the ghouls or lutins or elves or any of the miscellaneous shape-changers.

Only the demons.

The evening was quiet, though not unnaturally so: foliage rustled, soft elfin chanting wafted from a nearby house, horses neighed and snorted in their stables and, far off, a solitary owl hooted. A light breeze brought the familiar scents to Zachary's nostrils. Wood-smoke was there, strong but sweet; wet leaves, a little mouldy; the tang of mint and myrtle and garlic. His mind sensed a handful of elves, a pair of ghouls, a feline familiar which shrank back at his mind-touch and raced away through the darkness. The real-world was all about him now, and he was only a few hundred yards from home.

Hi, he thought.

Good evening Zachary. The words clung briefly to his mind, curling around it before fading away like smoke.

He concentrated his thoughts and a greenish light with no obvious source came on to illuminate the slab on which he stood. Originally it had been a domicile of goblins—half-timbered and lead-roofed, with forty-three stairs—but he had levelled it, reduced it to a single smooth rock surface, for easier transition. He leapt down and followed a winding, beaten-earth path which ran diagonally across unfenced gardens and back-yards, between clumps of trees.

The light preceded him at walking pace.

I've brought some things for you. Hope you like them. I bought them in the shops. He could, fairly easily, have taken them without joining in with the pantomime of their monetary system, but the if-worlders were dead-set against such behaviour. If they caught him they might, despite their essential impermanence, be able to keep him from his magic, to prevent him from returning to the real-world. So he conformed to their system, followed their rules—working, receiving wages, spending money—to get the things they both needed.

Nice of you. Did you have a good day?

Oh, yes. You'd never believe ... He cut off the thought. He couldn't tell her about Pearl. As it was she always made a point of cautioning him against too much involvement with the if-world. (*It is only a personalised dream-world, Zachary. You must never let it become real to you. And you should not go into these places where I am unable to protect you. It may be only a creation of your subconscious but still it could trap you.*)

Zachary? Whatever is the matter?

Oh, nothing. He invented quickly: *Well, I thought I sensed one of the demons out there in front of me.* He kicked at a dandelion beside the path, angry with himself for arousing her suspicions.

I am checking the route for you now. I can see nothing hostile. Though they are out in force in some other parts of the country.

Maybe I was wrong. He took a fresh grip on the carrier-bag, then paused to listen and sniff the night air again. Of course there was nothing around to menace him. But he had satisfied her. He was calm and assured now, the master of his surroundings. Passing between two blocks of terraced, thatch-roofed cottages, he came out on to a street that was narrow and undistinguished. Yet it was solid, real,

vivid. Wrapped in darkness it was still a dozen times more colourful and alive than its if-world counterpart. The shapes of the buildings were different, of course, though the pattern of streets and open spaces was very similar. But in the if-world even those broad and vulgar thoroughfares seemed to be maintaining themselves with difficulty, seemed to be hovering always on the brink of change like the clouds above.

And the people ...

This street, in the if-world, bustled with people. But whether strolling or moving with purpose, whether playing or washing their cars or standing and talking together in groups, they were grey people; all were cast in the same mould, as drab and dreary to Zachary as their if-world street.

He was coming to a major road now. Here it bore no name, though the thought picture used to describe it included the Pleiades. It was cobbled, as were all real-world streets, though in the if-world it was surfaced with tarmac and hung about with traffic signs and parking meters: the Seven Sisters Road. And beyond that, in the middle of what the if-worlders referred to as Finsbury Park, was home—the fastness of Goulde.

Something moist touched Zachary's face. Immediately he stopped, swung away and crouched, tried to bring his hands up into a defensive position. But he couldn't move. His arms were pinioned, and tacky strands were settling across his face, clinging. A web was tightening around him. It was Baal. It could be the work of none of the others.

Margarite! He shouted the thought. *Get me out of this!*

The demon prince showed himself then, scuttling forward on spider's legs. He wore the head of a cat tonight, with sleek black fur. Red robes hid his body. He stood in front of Zachary, slowly swaying from side to side, yellow eyes unblinking.

'She cannot hear you, wizard,' said Baal in a faintly sibilant tone. 'This immediate area is mind-blocked by a new spell of my own design so strong that even *she* will be unable to penetrate it. You are truly ensnared and I have no intention of releasing you.'

What are you after, Baal? I thought we had a truce. Zachary's lips were sealed by the gummy gossamer fibres so that he could neither call out nor intone the spells which might extricate him, but he could still talk with his mind.

'Well, there is a little matter of gaining entrance to this dream-world of yours. If you could take me through to it I feel that my gratitude would be very nearly boundless.'

But nobody else can make the transition to the if-world. It's my own creation, linked to me. If you think you can reach it you're a fool, Baal!

'Not so,' said the demon, waving a black and scaly finger at Zachary. 'There are such riches there that I would be a fool not to try reaching the place. Moreover, I feel that the great number of journeys you have made there and back must have so weakened the fabric dividing the two worlds that travel between them has become considerably easier than was the case at first. Is that not true?'

It was true. Zachary had not considered it before, but transition did seem less of a strain each time. That could be just the result of his growing power, but on the other hand Baal might be right in his reasoning. Yes, *it's a little easier*, he replied, *but I can't get anybody else through. Not even Margarite. I've tried.* It was half a lie, for Margarite had never permitted him to make such an attempt, but as a story it seemed convincing.

'Being so certain about it then, wizard, you will hardly object to aiding me, will you?' The cat face grinned, showing sharp teeth and a darting red tongue.

Zachary thought about the if-world. He thought of Pearl. *Damn you, Baal. I wouldn't take the risk.* He leaned back

against the clinging web: it gave a little but took his weight. An idea came to him.

'Ahhh, so you consider my successful transition to be a possibility? At last we are moving in the right direction. And stop trying to twist your body loose. It will do you no good.'

Taking a deep breath first, Zachary threw himself backwards against the web and kicked his legs high into the air, making a cross of them. At once the web softened. He wrenched his right arm free and showed Baal a horned hand. It was not a very powerful defence and the demon laughed as he moved to counter it.

With a thunderclap of sound the mind-block burst, imploded. An invisible force raised Baal off the ground as if he had been only a manikin, shook him roughly and tossed him through the wall of a nearby house, causing black shapes to flee in every direction.

Are you all right, Zachary? The anxious candy-floss thought wrapped itself around his mind—comforting, blanketlike.

Yes. He was gesturing the last traces of sticky cobweb off his face. *Baal wasn't trying to hurt me, anyway. He wanted to get into my if-world.*

I apologise for taking so long, Zachary, but there was nothing quite right in the grimoire. I had to experiment before I found the path through that block.

Sure, sis. Just let me get home. I feel tired all of a sudden.

Two

ZACHARY reached the Goulde fastness—a spell-guarded stronghold upon an island of green—without further incident. If the pattern of the past could be relied upon, the

other demons would give no trouble for several weeks, while their leader licked his wounds, recovered his pride and thought up a new method of attack.

The fastness doors opened at his approach and he strode unpausing to the large central chamber—decked with the apparatus of the weird and strewn with the ingredients of a thousand spells—where Margarite spent all her waking hours.

'What have you been doing all day, then? Apart from pulling me out of Baal's trap.' He shrugged off his cloak (which floated over to a wall-hook), dropped his bag on to the pentagrammed carpet and threw himself into a chair opposite hers.

Her eyes examined him minutely, not missing a detail but moving swiftly in darting glances. And her mouth, slowly and with much effort, took on that lop-sided grimace which he knew for a smile. No other part of her moved. No other part could. The limbs were paralysed, atrophied. They protruded grotesquely from her small hunched body.

I talked with Needleman and some of the others around the country. The Dupont fastness is under actual seige, now.

Zachary sat up, shaking his head. 'Who's leading the demons there?'

Asmodeus. In fact, several fastnesses have been attacked and others report that there seems to be a general increase in demonic activity. I happened to mention your if-world to Needleman: he asked where you were and I told him. Anyway, there is apparently somebody in one of the far northern fastnesses who is able to visualise a world like yours but not reach it.

'How much like?'

Needleman didn't know. But he wants to talk to you. I think he has some plan to use the if-world's resources to help us all.

'Maybe tomorrow; I'm too tired now. Anyway, why tell me? Have you suddenly decided to approve of my creation?'

Zachary, you know that anything which might help the other fastnesses in their fight against—

'Sure.' He shook off her tendril of thought and tried to suppress his irritation. 'Have you eaten?'

I waited for you, like you told me.

'Good.' He bounced out of the chair and knelt down, reaching into the carrier-bag. 'I brought some new things: lobster soup, asparagus tips, guavas.' He pulled out the tins and displayed them as he spoke, knowing all the time that she could see them just as well in the bag, that she had been able to see them since the moment he had made the transition. But she shouldn't have: that was pure mental power. It was not the way a witch should act at all. They had argued over it often, but she persisted.

'And this,' he said, producing it with a rabbit-from-hat flourish, pulling off some tissue-paper wrapping.

I see it, but what is it? And he didn't know whether she was playing a game with him or not.

'A special sort of bracelet.' He fitted the copper band on to her wasted wrist. 'You know how the if-world products perform so differently there from here? Remember how I told you that these delicacies taste just like sawdust to me there? And their magic, how pitiful it is? Well, I had a thought that perhaps the quality of that magic, too, will be improved by transition. It's a charm to cure' ... he looked away from her, hesitating to speak the words that she could not have failed to read in his mind ... 'rheumatism, arthritis, any stiffening of the joints. I thought ... That is, I'm certain ...'

He swung around to face her, putting his hands on the arms of her ornate chair, his enthusiasm overflowing. 'Don't you see, Margarite? It'll work. It'll cure you. It has

to! You'll be able to walk around, cast spells the proper way, come with me to visit the if ...' He bit hard into his lip, cursing inwardly.

Pause.

Perhaps you should make the invocation which activates its powers. He wondered how a thought could be so cold.

'Oh, it doesn't need a spell. It works by ... faith.'

Pause.

So first I must believe in the if-world?

'All right. I give up. Just forget it. I'll take it back when I——'

I thank you for the thought, Zachary. I shall keep your present, of course. The gentle touch of icebergs. Shall we eat now?

He gathered up the tins and left the room, wondering how it would be if he ever let on to her about Pearl.

Zachary mounts concrete steps from the Underground, two at a time, up to street level. It is early dusk, the time the if-world seems at its least substantial. There are blurs upon blurs, and the human figures are puppets dressed in grey. The ubiquitous crowds mill around him still, seeming to taunt him in his own dream.

He is angry :

... With Needleman, the great wizard of the western hills, who has suggested—by sword-like thrusts of thought which come within a fraction of being commands—that he should obtain from his if-world certain magical constituents for use against the demons, and that he should reveal the secrets of transition to enable the if-world's use as a last-resort escape route for the occupants of any fastnesses which fall.

... With Margarite, the witch-sibling, who has greeted with silent and suspicious hostility his stated intention to stay late in the if-world that evening.

He is anxious, running the last few yards to the cinema in case she is early, and imagining disasters once he knows she is not; he is impatient, pacing the pavement which fronts that chrome-edged cavern-mouth a dozen times—then a dozen more—seeing elements of Pearl in every third girl who passes. Then she is standing at his elbow without warning, in a blue coat, smiling up at him. He extends an arm, ushering her before him in male chauvinist fashion. She misunderstands with convincing ingenuousness, linking arms with him. Ten feet tall, he escorts her in.

Later, over coffee cups empty except for the inch of espresso foam, they talk, progressing by stages from embarrassed silences to flowing exchanges of personal details, though nervousness makes an occasional scatter-gun of his larynx.

'What kind of music d'you like, Zack?' she is saying. 'Do you follow the charts?'

'Er, no. Not really. But I do play——' Tongue biting.

Admiration. 'You play an instrument! Which one?'

'Oh, just a bit. Guitar, percussion ...' (*Lute and tabor, fife and bell. It's necessary for the sabbat.*)

And: 'Well, I read quite a lot, Pearl.' Holding that tiny hand now, stroking it. It's so much finer, more detailed than anything else in the if-world.

'What sort of thing d'you read?'

'Quite a variety.' (*Now or never.*) 'Quite a bit of, er, astrology, occult. You know?'

The enthusiasm doesn't exactly bubble over. 'Yes?' She almost says more but a swarthy woman, plump and unsmiling, clatters their cups together and wipes the plastic table-top between them, forcing a quick retraction of hands.

And again: 'No, they both died when I was very young. An accident.' (*Outmagicked and slaughtered by Baal and his minions through over-reliance upon the protection of a mandrake. Or so you tell me, Margarite. So you tell me.*)

'All I've got is an elder sister.'

'Married?' she asks, eyes still wide with sympathy at the revelation of orphanhood.

'No. She's, er, an invalid—crippled.'

'Ohh. I'm sorry.' So genuine, so sincere. 'Do you live with her?'

'Er, not really. I've got a room in Highbury.'

'And where does she live, Zack?'

(*Ulterior motives, yet?*) 'Not too far away. I visit her a lot. Do things for her, you know.' (*Wash her, feed her, cook and clean. Mustn't let her do it all by mind-power. It isn't right.*)

She tells him of living with parents in Ealing; of a brother who died; of dressmaking, ice-skating, dancing. She tells him the day of her birth. (*She's a Leo!*) He does quick pencilled calculations on a paper serviette. (*And born under Saturn. My complement: she was made for me.*) Then his enthusiasm fades a trifle. (*But, then, I would expect her to be my ideal. It's my dream-world. I created her.*) Just the same, he squeezes her hand again.

Something intrudes on their imagined privacy. A man in the street is looking through the café window at them. Pearl's sudden alarm is almost theatrical. Zachary's attention is diverted back to her and the man moves on.

'It was Brian,' she says.

'Who?'

'I used to go out with him, but it's all over between us. Honestly, Zack. I told him I don't want to see him again.'

'When was that?'

'Well . . . this afternoon. On the phone.' She blushes.

He nods. The position is clear. The better man has won but green-eyed Brian won't admit it. Zachary memorises the face at the window: fair hair brushed back, large features, an impression of tallness, rather flamboyant clothes.

The mood is broken. He looks deeply into Pearl's face but cannot read the emotion there.

'I suppose I'd better be getting home,' she says. 'There aren't many trains this time of the evening.'

'I'll walk you to the station.'

Each Wednesday evening he washed his sister's malformed body. It never bore the slightest trace of dirt and he knew that she kept it so by mind-power. The washing was a ritual, though—a symbolic admission that she needed his presence—which neither of them seemed anxious to terminate. This time, as he mechanically soaped and sponged, his thoughts were a world away, dwelling on secret smiles and large brown eyes. He almost failed to notice the lessened stiffness in her joints, the ease with which he could move her limbs.

Then: 'It's working! The bracelet—it's working. Don't you feel it?'

Her answering smile was less of a rictus. *Yes, Zachary. There is more suppleness in my arms than I have ever know before. But the imagination...*

'I'm glad. I'm so glad ... Implication? Oh, you mean you've changed your mind about the if-world?' He squeezed her hand, thinking for a moment that she was Pearl.

It has been forced upon me. I was speaking with Needleman again this afternoon ...

'So that's why it took you five minutes to answer me after I made the transition.' He waved the sponge scoldingly. 'You had me worried there; I thought Baal had got you.' He made a joke of it, then wished he hadn't.

No, Zachary. That was not the reason, though there is a basic connection. I spoke to Needleman earlier and we talked of the if-world. You see, the Dupont lastness fell last night and already Asmodeus is laying siege to the Wylie

fastness nearby. There is similar bad news from the north, where the Sedgewicke fastness is hard-pressed by Sonneillon and his legions. They cannot hold out for long. It is centuries since the demons had such success.

'But can't Needleman organise some help? Surely ...'

The demons are uncommonly active everywhere and in great strength. Needleman's own stronghold is being harassed, just sufficiently to prevent him from sending aid.

Zachary nodded his head slowly. 'They've been pretty quiet around here, though.'

You forget it is only five days since Baal held you captive.

'Oh, that wasn't serious.' He shrugged. 'All Baal wanted was a way of getting into the if-world. I told you.'

Yes, and so I told Needleman. It was a vital piece of information, he said. You see, it is one of the Sedgewickes who can visualise an if-world—an if-world which seems identical with yours. And Needleman thinks one of the Duponts—a younger son—may have access to an if-world, too. He escaped to the Wylie fastness, but the remainder of his family perished. Is the pattern as clear to you as it is to me?

Zachary shrugged again. 'So one or two others have created their own if-worlds, the demons have heard about it and they're after the rich pickings. They can't win. Baal won't get the transition spell out of me—though if he did it probably wouldn't work for him—and if he killed me I suppose my if-world would just cease to exist.'

Your if-world! Have you never thought to wonder why you have no control over its form, over its destiny? Does the fact that its operation and shape are so much more logical than this world never worry you? Can you see no significance at all in the news that others of us are breaking through to the same world? Oh, Zachary, it never was your if-world, except in the sense that you may have been the first of us to visit it. Do you understand me now?

'You mean I didn't create the if-world?' Brow wrinkled, he stared down at her.

Yes! It is just another world, equally real, but somewhat different from this one. In the circumstances there is no other explanation. I expect more of us—perhaps many—will achieve the transition, given time. If the demons will let us. Even I . . . But I think the main obstacle to transition is the magical rigmarole you employ to complicate a process which is actually mind-controlled.

'Margarite!' He was shocked. 'How can you say that? It's, well, it's heresy.' He backed away from the bath tub, scared of his sister's new-found attitudes. She had always made use of a little mind-power—which was wrong, though understandable in her condition—but never before had she said such things. 'I wouldn't have believed it possible that you, of all people——'

Events around us force changes within us, Zachary. Our 'real-world' is disintegrating about our ears. Some will escape to the if-world. The sheer numbers of the inhabitants there will enable us to live unnoticed and unmolested. I expect some of the demons will follow, but their powers, too, will be less. For the inferior breeds of this world I see nothing but a life of slavery under demon rule, It is the end of an era. Come, finish washing me.

Zachary was recovering his composure, but he was unconvinced. 'You've no proof. It's a bit of divination plus some guesswork plus a few rumours spread by Needleman.'

I trust my precognition. But there is one more thing: the reason why I did not reply to your call after transition today. Your call was not reaching me. Your mental images were weak and indistinct—they still are. You are becoming a part of the if-world, Zachary.

THREE

FORTY-TWO, forty-three. He fumbles to fit his key into the lock.

'I'm sorry it's so dark here. There should be a light but ...'

After a short struggle the door capitulates, swinging inwards unexpectedly, its handle banging against the wardrobe.

She says, 'It's a good thing you don't go in for cat-swinging.' Smiling silently she stands just inside the doorway, soaking up the feeling of the small bed-sitter. Then, 'It looks so ... bare. You don't keep many things with you, Zack.' Perhaps a trace of pity in her tone.

'They're nearly all at the ... at my sister's house. Look, I'll light the fire. It's not very warm in here. And I'll put the kettle on. I'm sure you'd like some coffee, wouldn't you?'

She nods, taking off her coat and dropping it, with her bag, on to the bed. She sits in front of the gas fire, arms crossed, hugging her shoulders. Zachary looks at her, in profile as she stares into the brightening glow, still marveling that anyone so beautiful should, in return, be attracted to him. He plugs in the kettle (only bought the day before, after work, and filled that morning, in readiness). He spoons recently acquired coffee into recently acquired mugs. She is so trusting, he thinks, to come home with him, straight from work, preparatory to eating out together that evening. ('It's such a long way out to Ealing. Come back to my place and we can spend the time talking. You can change in the bathroom there.'—'Okay, Zack. Thanks.')

A ruse, a convenience, an excuse: that's all it is, this Friday-night meal, this bed-sitter coffee-break. As they sit, sipping from steaming mugs, he moves to display his

ulterior motive. 'Let me show you some of my things that I do have with me.' He stands up, unlocks a drawer and slides it off its runners, sits down again, placing it on the floor between them.

'Jewellery?' she asks, puzzled.

'Amulets. See, these two rings have got pieces of amber set in them, and this one's jade. Both are pretty good for general protection against harmful spells. This stuff is siderite—iron ore from the skies—shaped to represent Ceres or Cybele or Vesta, you know, the great Earth Mothers. It's really very powerful protection against——'

'Zack! You don't believe all this, surely? About magic and spells and so on.'

'But it works. It really does—especially where I come from ...'

'You're serious, aren't you? You do believe in it.'

'And why not? There's nothing wrong with magic. It isn't dangerous if you follow the correct procedures.'

She stands up, shaking her head vigorously. 'It's all so creepy. It's horrid!'

'Listen to me, Pearl. I'll show you. Just a simple spell. I'll prove——'

'No!' Her eyes brim with brown tears. She picks up her coat and bag.

'Don't go. Please. Pearl!'

Her shoes clatter down the lino-covered stairs. The front door slams.

Zachary sits on the bed. He cannot understand her reaction. (*Are all girls here so scared of magic?*) He contemplates ways of redeeming himself in her eyes, or of convincing her that she's wrong. The oppressiveness of that tiny room suddenly impinges on his thoughts, rushing at him from the walls, covering him. The claustrophobic ambience is stifling. He must go somewhere, but he cannot face Margarite—not as he feels now, not as she has been for

the last couple of evenings.

Slowly, carefully, he replaces the drawer of amulets and locks it.

Dean Street, Soho, mid-evening: strip clubs and trattorias and porn shops. Zachary wanders, rubber-necking with the blurred-faced crowds. To him it's a slideshow, an enticing world surrounding him like an all-encompassing succubus, but he gains little pleasure—even vicarious—on this occasion. Into Bateman Street and Frith Street, Old Compton Street and Greek Street. He walks through the garishly lit night, past chic foreign restaurants, past cinema queues, past dark and deserted delicatessens, with a hamburger-and-fried-onion smell strong in his nostrils.

Gradually he walks off his mood, but nothing is resolved in his mind. At the end of Greek Street is Soho Square. On a path between its meagre patches of grass he stops. Behind him, footsteps stop. Footsteps. (Footsteps on lino-covered stairs. A small girl—barely up to his shoulder. Large brown eyes. Could it be?)

He turns.

It's a man. Tall, young, fair-haired. Brian.

Zachary speaks first. 'What do you want?'

'You know who I am?'

'I know.'

'Then you know you took her away from me. Six months we've been going out, and now you come along and take her. Just like that.'

Zachary shrugs. 'It was her decision.'

'Well, you're going to leave her alone in future. Do you hear me? You're not going to take her out again, then she'll come back to me.' His tone is loud, petulant.

'You've already lost her, Brian.'

'No!' Brian runs at him.

Zachary moves instinctively and ...

... he was in the real-world. He landed in a demon camp, close to a fire, interrupting one of their black ceremonies.

Demons scattered, some leaping the flames to escape him. But they formed a ring, just beyond the firelight's reach, all watching him, recognising him. Baal skittered between them, into the ring. Even wearing his toad's head—warty and huge of eye—Baal had sufficient charisma to be unmistakable.

Time seemed to pause then, with Zachary more concerned over his means of transportation than his predicament. Baal circled him, saying words which did not filter through. Zachary considered. He had been in the if-world; he had thought and now here he was—in the real-world. His neo-Cartesian ability both astounded and encouraged him. Margarite's dismissal of the ritual of magic had been proven correct—in this case, at least. He had to tell her, but first ...

He grasped Baal's scaly, three-fingered hand and the circle of demons vanished ...

... giving way to the glorious vistas of Soho Square as Brian rushes in blindly, fists flying. Several blows land on Baal before Brian knows what it is that he is hitting. Realisation is a counter-punch which sends him reeling back, screaming. He lies on the short, pigeon-soiled grass, retching. A part of Zachary's mind notes dispassionately that it is not solely the women of the if-world who harbour an unreasonable terror of all things magical. Then he sees that the demon is waving hands and arms, forming complicated signs in the air—all to no effect in this world where magic scarcely works—and he laughs. He laughs at them both. His hand clasps Baal's again ...

... and they were back among the demons. Making no external sign, Zachary flattened the demon camp, rolling a

thousand of its inhabitants in the mud simultaneously. There was no necessity to kill or injure them now that he could do it with such ease. Carefully he checked his position with respect to the fastness, then shifted himself across the three or four miles of real-world with no perceptible time-loss, right to the fastness door.

Right to where the fastness door should have been. But in the dim green light cast by his mind he could see that the spell-guarded building was in ruins, demolished by some greater power. The oaken door lay in splintered fragments at his feet; the masonry was scattered for yards around; no walls remained and it was difficult to see even where they had been.

As Zachary stood amidst the rubble, unable to comprehend, unable to react, the words which Baal had spoken a minute or two before penetrated his consciousness.

'We shall kill you, wizard, as we killed your sister.' Killed your sister. **KILLED YOUR SISTER.** The words felt like branding irons upon his mind.

'Margarite!' He screamed out her name, aloud and in thought. He ran to the spot where her chair had rested. He found her there, lying unmarked upon a small, clear circle of carpeting. Kneeling, he took one of her hands in his and a tingling shock darted up his arm. His hopes rose, just for a moment, but he found there was no pulse, no respiration, no mental activity, and he supposed the tingle had been no more than some residual spell, just sufficient to keep the rubble off her body. Ironically, she looked more peaceful, less grotesque, in death than ever she had in life: the copper bracelet had done its work too late.

Too late? Not at all, he thought. He would raise her by necromancy. The grimoire ... But the grimoire had been burnt. He recognised its pile of ashes by the fancy brass clasp, now blackened. Well, he would do his best to recall

the spell—he would recall it. Then, as he considered the practicalities—the tools, the essences, the picture of Margarite, all of which were required for any chance of success—hope of bringing her back slipped away. The demons had destroyed and scattered to the winds every magical implement and potion that the fastness had held.

He knelt there beside her for minutes, bours—her cold hand gripped in his. His brain had been numbed, his thoughts fogged. But he could not look away from Margarite's body, could not even blur its image with tears. Nothing disturbed his reverie, his silent mourning.

His sister's precognition had been correct, as usual. (*But why couldn't you foresee your own death, Margarite? Foresee it and avoid it.*) The real-world was disintegrating around him: not only were its institutions—the fastness system and the traditional hierarchy of castes—being overturned and replaced by a regime of demons, but also the fabric of the real-world was—perhaps for him alone—losing its sharp edge of reality as he and it drifted out of phase. Irrevocably he was becoming a part of the if-world, and with his quintessential reason for remaining in the real-world lying dead before him he no longer felt tied to the world of his birth. Indeed, he had no need of magic now. She had been so right there, too.

So he would forsake the real-world, whose damp and blustery dawn showed him blurred destruction set amidst a watery and indistinct greensward which was, in its own turn, encircled by houses. He would return to his adopted if-world, to Pearl. Pearl . . . he had forgotten, with so much else happening, that she had run from him, run from his drawer of amulets. He realised that she was his only friend now—in either world. It was love for her which kept him sane, which gave him all the hope he had. But he had no use for magic now. If he could convince her of that . . .

Stiffly he rose and, standing unsteadily on numbed legs, he caused his sister's small, frail body to be consumed by fire. He watched until the smoke had died away and most of the ashes had been dispersed by the wind, then he made the transition, for the last time, to his room in the if-world.

It was a small, neat semi-detached with wrought-iron gates, a low privet hedge and net curtains at every window. In the front garden was a tiny pond containing withered goldfish, overlooked by the brightly painted statue of a gnome. A little bit schmaltsy, a little bit kitsch, it differed only in finer detail and shade of paint from any other house in that wasteland of suburbia. It was embedded in mediocrity and appeared to be deserted of humanity on that Saturday afternoon, but to Zachary it was the palace of a queen, of a goddess. He had not visited Pearl's home before, but the address, like most of her other personal facts and figures, was written upon his memory in letters of gold.

As the bell's saccharine triple-chime died away, a small man, bespectacled and aged about fifty, opened the door.

'Is Pearl in, please?' He was so anxious, trying hard not to show it.

The man inspected him from head to toe with narrowed eyes, betraying an air of irritable suspicion. 'Your name is ... ?'

'Zachary.'

'Wait a minute.' The man showed no sign of recognition at the name. He partly closed the door and padded upstairs. Returning after a few moments he said, 'She's just coming.' There was no smile, no lessening of the suspicion. He disappeared into a downstairs room.

'Zack!' She called out to him as she came running down the stairs. 'Oh, Zack!' She flung the door wide, smiling, with stars glistening in her eyes, and took his outstretched hands.

As their fingers touched, tingling, a slight shudder went through her and she looked momentarily confused.

'Pearl, how are you? Forgive me for yesterday. I didn't mean to upset you, honestly!' His words rushed out. 'You were right. It was stupid of me to have bothered with all that magic stuff. I'll forget all about it in future, I promise. It isn't necessary. It doesn't have a place here—not any more. Will you forgive me?'

Her smile returned, subtly different now. 'Of course I will. I am very glad to know that you agree with me now, Zachary.'

His eyes widened and he nodded very slowly.

NOTES FROM THE ANDROID UNDERGROUND

by

MARIE JAKOBER

The Production of a perfect android implies among other things a perfection of physical form and an artificial creation in no significant way dissimilar from a man—or a woman. Given this as a premise, why should not the corollary be true? A brand-new author to the pages of New Writings in SF here gives us a sensitive woman's viewpoint of what the corollary might entail.

NOTES FROM THE ANDROID UNDERGROUND

THE WOMAN on the slab was very beautiful, very naked, and very dead. Even in this glaring light, laid out like a specimen on the laboratory table, she seemed somehow delicate—too young, too unready for death.

'You will observe,' the doctor was saying, 'that no details have been overlooked. The body is perfect.' He spoke in a monotone that belied the significance of his words; he had repeated them too many times, to too many officials and investigators; they had become commonplace to him.

Burrows and Shannon watched in numb astonishment as he demonstrated that perfection, noting shapes and structures and colours and textures, thorough to the point of obscenity. When he had finished, there was a long moment of silence.

'Well,' Jason Taggart said finally, looking at Burrows, 'do you believe me now?'

Burrows looked up, glancing at each of us in turn. His hard face glistened with sweat; his eyes still shone with a mixture of lurid fascination and intense revulsion.

He glared briefly at Taggart, and then turned to the doctor. 'I admit the body is perfect. But how do you know it isn't human?'

'A simple matter of molecular structure. Look, I will show you.' He led Burrows over to a counter crowded with microscopes, matter analysers and at least a dozen other

research devices which I did not recognise.

'The body is—or was, I should say—living tissue; but it is not human tissue. There is no possible doubt.' He steered Burrows towards a large microscope. 'See for yourself.'

That, I knew, was not going to help. Burrows did not need more evidence; the evidence we had was already overwhelming. He needed to readjust some of his basic thinking. For Burrows, that would not be easy.

Thirty minutes ago he had sat with us in Taggart's office, his eyes reddened from the long trip through midnight smog, his temper more growly than usual, and snarled at us:

'Androids? You mean robots!'

'No,' Taggart said softly. 'Androids. Proto-humans. They're alive, warm-blooded, and as far as we can tell, completely rational. They eat, breathe, sleep, read books, copulate—and unfortunately, engage in subversive activities.'

'No way,' Burrows said.

I watched Taggart. Nothing ruffled him. He smiled faintly. 'Shall we go down to the lab?'

'Look,' Burrows insisted as we walked. 'Maybe they can put some sort of machine together that looks human. Talks maybe. Walks around. Maybe even simulates eating. But that's it! It's a machine, and it's going to be recognisable as a machine!'

He said a great deal more. Artificial life was impossible. It was also vile and immoral. Why the second point should be relevant, if the first were true, was a matter that quite eluded him.

But Burrows was trying only to convince himself.

Now, as he busied himself with the microscope, I turned to ask Taggart:

'How did you find out about her?'

'She was found at Kaley Bridge—probably hit by a car. There was a routine enquiry. The coroner nearly died of a heart attack, but he had the sense to call NAIC instead of the newspapers or the university.'

He glanced up briefly as Burrows drifted back towards us, his hands full of computer print-outs, and then went on:

'No hint of this, of course, will leave this building. Nor will it be noted in any official record. As far as the police, the press, or family and friends are concerned, Elena Dumesnil was just another tragic hit and run victim.'

We walked back down the long hall, silent, the full enormity of the thing we had seen finally sinking into our minds; leaving us, according to our temperaments, awed or appalled, fascinated or sick with disgust.

We regrouped in Taggart's office. He sat on the edge of his desk, looking around at each of us for a moment—Burrows and Shannon, élite members of the North American Intelligence Corps, and me, a junior operative with a dossier full of trivial successes.

'As you know,' he began, 'proto-life research has been going on uninterrupted since the middle of the last century. All that the ban in '98 did was drive it underground.'

'Outlawed research groups have existed in every technological state. There were occasional prosecutions, of course, but largely they were ignored. It was believed that without access to major funding sources, and without the stimulation of open discussion and exchange within the scientific community, they would achieve little of importance.'

He paused, reaching to pull out a file.

'I think you've all seen where that sort of thinking led us,' he went on. 'While the moralists of the world were congratulating themselves on having put a stop to unnatural experimentation, androids were being built, pro-

grammed and channelled into key political and economic positions. Elena Dumesnil was the private secretary of a top presidential advisor. The others could be anyone ... anywhere.'

'Others?' Shannon asked numbly.

'Of course, others. Fabrini doesn't build a factory to make one aircar.'

She settled back in her chair, whistling softly.

'Our only hope of locating the others,' Taggart continued, 'is to find the source—to discover who is producing them and where.'

He tossed the file he held to Burrows. 'These are the security clearance reports on Dumesnil and her husband. His name is David McCreary. He's a hovership pilot, and something of an intellectual. He's your assignment, Burrows.'

'You mean that ... that creature was ... married?' Burrows asked.

Taggart smiled. 'Why not? You saw her.'

The big man almost shuddered. 'Anyone who'd even touch one of those ... must be sick.'

'I don't know,' Taggart said lightly. 'If it weren't for the security risk, I wouldn't mind spending a week-end with one of them myself.'

Burrows glared at him, his eyes cold with contempt. He looked to us for confirmation, but we ignored him. Burrows was always on the prod. He would make this, as he had made so many other cases, a personal crusade.

To Jason Taggart this was all a new game—an intriguing new game in a life of mortal competition. To Shannon it was a puzzle for her devastating mathematical mind. To me it was my first—and, if wasted, no doubt my last—crack at Taggart's team and Taggart's bed.

Only Burrows had to make it something different. The truth was the man had no business in NAIC. He was too

hung up on ethics. To him international intelligence was not a game of skill but a holy war. He believed that there was a right side and a wrong side; he believed in the preservation of democracy, motherhood and unadulterated protein.

The sincerity of his morals was matched only by his total ruthlessness in their defence. He was incapable of compromise. It was Taggart who could manipulate and bargain, who could balance lives and information, who could weigh future gains against present losses, and whose unerring instinct for survival kept us all alive.

Burrows despised him, hated working with him, and most of all hated to admit that Taggart's amorality might have done more for NAIC and its cause than his own dedication had done.

Taggart had hauled out another file, taking from it a picture of a distinguished, middle-aged man.

'Here's your target, Shannon. Doctor Henry Beckman. For six years Elena Dumesnil's personal physician. McCreary may not have known that she was an android, but Beckman must have.

'His nurse had an accident a few hours ago. She'll be hospitalised for at least two months. The placement agency is sending him an emergency substitute—you. Here are your documents—social security, diploma, references and a two-hour medical refresher course. Any questions?'

'Jesus Christ, Jason! It's six years since I saw the inside of Harvard Med!'

'You'll be all right, love. Beckman's practice is mostly bored rich women who want sympathy. Cultivate a taste for gossip, tea and expensive chocolates, and you'll have it made.'

'Thanks a lot.'

'Christi, how's your German?'

'Flawless,' I answered honestly.

'Good.' The file he gave me was fat, stuffed to bursting

with pictures, documents and reports. At the very top was a colour portrait of a woman. Her age was difficult to guess—she might have been thirty-five or fifty-five, and she was beautiful in a regal way.

'That,' Taggart said emphatically, 'is Lady Katherine Kraus—German-born aristocrat, queen of the Kraus millions, and quite possibly the brains behind the entire android operation.'

'Wasn't her husband under suspicion for illegal experimentation—what? about ten years ago?' Burrows asked.

'Yes. He had a lot of powerful friends, so it was impossible for us to prove anything. He was killed soon after in a fire at the Kraus estate, and after his death NAIC lost interest in the family. That was another beautiful mistake.'

'Is there any evidence to link Dumesnil to the Kraus family?' I asked.

'Yes. Quite a bit, though most of it is circumstantial. It's all in the file.' He handed me a photograph of a girl. She was young and blonde, with delicate features and deep, sensitive eyes.

'Who is she?'

'Your alter ego. Anna Ludmilla Kraus. Lady Katherine's favourite niece. Her father was a research scientist, and a close associate of his brother and the Lady. Milla practically lived at the Kraus estate—until the fire. It killed her father, and also her best friend, a girl named Christina Fosse. She went to pieces—turned completely against her family, especially against Lady Katherine.

'Four years ago she ran away to live on a medev commune. She's into drugs, religion, ritual sex, witchcraft—god alone knows what else, but Lady Katherine still believes she'll come to her senses and come home.

'Everything you need is in there, Christi. Learn it. Get a hairdo and a monastic wardrobe. You're going home to Auntie, love.'

The dossier was incredibly complete; accumulated, no doubt, by unassuming junior agents like myself, who pack-ratted information home in amorphous piles out of which our superiors could magically assemble these formidable packages.

Still, Taggart was setting me a perilous task.

'Jason,' I said, 'people living together in a family situation—there's going to be things happening—insignificant little intimate things that are remembered, and that aren't going to be in this file.'

'You'll be surprised at what is in that file, when you read it. Milla Kraus was twice under psychiatric care, and she was very free with her reminiscences.

'But you're right. There are going to be loop-holes. You'll have to pass them off as gaps in a drug-blown mind. Under the circumstances, that should seem quite believable.'

'I see.' It might work at that, I thought. The medevs were a subcult group given not only to drugs and uncleanness, like many of their twentieth-century forerunners, but also to severe fasting and masochistic penances. They tried to restore to our materialistic world the rigours of medieval monasticism. All that they accomplished was the destruction of their own mental and physical health. Milla's encounter with them, as well as with occultism and other foolishness, could be made to account for a great deal.

'Well,' Taggart stood up. 'That's it. I'll expect you all to keep in touch.'

He smiled a simple dismissal, and we were on our way. He never made speeches, never impressed upon us the importance of our tasks. It was one of the many things I liked about him.

I did not see much of him in the days that followed, but then, nobody ever did. Nothing in his life, except the style

of it, had ever been permanent. He had grown up in the slums of London, a street urchin living by his wits. He had served as a mercenary for the North African Union and operated a successful smuggling ring in South America before drifting into the ranks of NAIC and becoming, in less than a decade, one of the half-dozen top agents in the world. In an occupation which drove many to alcoholism and suicide, his self-possession was astonishing. Mistresses came and went in his life like passwords; none of them left a mark. Blunders and betrayals knocked holes in his organization; he rebuilt without bitterness. Politicians handcuffed him and then howled when he could not meet their expectations; he laughed at them. He was a twenty-four carat professional.

'Taggart,' Burrows had assured us once in bitter indignation, 'is half animal and half machine, without a single solitary trace of humanity to get between them.'

It was intended as a condemnation, but I did not take it so. As machines went, Taggart was a model of efficiency. And he was the most beautiful animal I had ever seen.

Only one item remained to be cleared before I undertook my mission into the heart of the Kraus family. My alter ego, the real Ludmilla, had to be located; it would be embarrassing Taggart observed, if we both turned up foot-sore and repentant at the same time.

We never did locate her. She had gone to Colorado, and thence to Canada, and no one knew what had become of her after that. An acquaintance thought that she had gone to Tibet with a disillusioned lawyer. Finally, after two and a half days, we found someone who remembered the lawyer's name, giving us a chance to get confirmation from his family. Taggart sent one of his best men to Toronto to get the facts, and he waited quietly that evening for his report.

Or, at least, I waited quietly. Taggart was never quiet.

He paced the room; not tense, yet always in motion, restless as a caged cat.

I watched him shamelessly. Just once, I thought. Just once, Jason Taggart. You and me and an old feather bed so big we could get lost in it ...

The phone rang.

'Taggart ... Yes, Dolan ... Uh-huh ... you're sure of that? Good ... I'll be in touch ... Chow.'

He hung up, turning to me cheerfully. 'Fraulein Kraus and her new *liebchen* are meditating in the mountains of Tibet. Needless to say, his wife is somewhat bitter—it seems he sold most of her jewellery to pay for their tickets.

'Anyway, you're in the clear.' He looked at me—really looked at me—I think for the first time. 'Good luck, Christi.'

I phoned Lady Katherine from a dingy downtown airbus depot. I was a mess—scruffy and sandalled and robed like the ghost of a medieval nun.

I was disillusioned, I told my beloved aunt. Disillusioned, ashamed and broke. I had had it with the penitential life. I wanted the world again, warm food and beds with mattresses. Could we please be friends again?

Lady Katherine cried a little and assured me that I would be welcomed with open arms. While I waited for her limousine I mailed Taggart a postcard that I had bought in a little German gift shop. It showed a stylised gingerbread house with a very pretty Gretel about to be stuffed into the witch's oven.

The Kraus estate was no gingerbread house. If anyone in the world had better security than NAIC, it was Lady Katherine. I was met by a chauffeur with an armed escort, and we went through three separate security checks before being allowed through the iron gates—checks involving some very elaborate equipment that I was not even supposed to recognise.

Lady Katherine looked exactly like her picture: tall and

elegant, with a poised, austere beauty.

'My darling niece,' she smiled. 'Welcome home.'

We embraced, kissed politely. She waved the porter upstairs with my bag.

'Dear Auntie Kath! You haven't changed a bit.'

'But you have.' She held my chin lightly, her eyes keen. 'You look . . . wiser. Are you wiser, *liebchen*?'

'Much wiser, Auntie.'

'Good. Come, let's go to my drawing room, where we can talk in peace.' She pressed a button, and a maid appeared. 'Tea and lunch in the drawing room, Magda. In ten minutes.'

'Yes, my lady.'

The drawing room door closed behind us. Lady Katherine wheeled to me, all the elegance forgotten, her proud face shining with delight.

'Christi! Darling Christi! Do you know how proud I am of you?'

She took my hands. 'I almost couldn't believe it when I saw you. How did you do it?'

'I don't know.' I sat down, tired in spite of her happiness and my achievement. 'Luck, mostly.'

'Luck?' she laughed. 'No chance. We trained over twenty agents to crack Taggart's team, and you're the only one who got through. Tell me what you know. How did Elena die?'

'As far as I know it really was an accident. She was hit by a car.'

'Damn!' Katherine said bitterly. 'What a damned waste!'

'The NAIC people know she was an android; they know there are others . . .'

'How?' she cut in sharply.

'It's a logical assumption, Kath. Who would make just one android?'

'Maybe. We'll get back to that. Go on, Christi.'

'They've linked her with you, obviously. That's why I'm here.'

'And with Beckman?'

'Yes.'

'And with the Devereux Institute?'

'Not yet. Devereux's still clear. They have Burrows on McCreary. If he gets lucky he could make the connection.'

'We'll take care of Burrows.' She turned sharply at the knock. 'Yes?'

'Lunch, Lady Katherine.'

'Good,' I said. 'I've been dying for this.'

Katherine smiled as I heaped my plate with delicacies. 'You are a sensualist, Christi. Even NAIC couldn't cure you of that.'

'NAIC,' I retorted, laughing, 'is the last place I'd be cured of that.'

We ate. We talked. We drank tea. The sun went down, and still we talked, until I was drained of every fragment of information and every remnant of energy. Katherine brought me a glass of sherry.

'You're tired,' she said, gently.

'Yes.'

'Dear Christi ...' She brushed my hair back lightly. 'You're so like Milla, you know. So like her. She could have been ...' She stopped sharply, turned away. 'It's too late for that now, isn't it? Did they tell you where she is?'

'Tibet. Visiting a guru, I think.'

'My god. I defy anyone, Christi, anyone who does not believe in free will, to raise a child.'

'Or to programme an android,' I added dryly.

She turned back to me, and her face softened. 'That, too. Well ... you must get some sleep, and I must see to Mr Burrows. Good night, Christi.'

'Good night, Kath.'

My old room was waiting, almost as I had left it, warm and familiar and, like everything else in the Kraus world, tasteful and gracious. Here even the life and death game we played for survival in a collapsing world—even that had a lingering touch of dignity.

Katherine Kraus was probably, in ordinary human terms, the most dangerous person alive in the world, yet the cynicism of men like Taggart, the malice of men like Burrows, were as alien to her as the moon.

She had been an innocent child during the Great Energy Wars, an unprotesting and dedicated student during the years after, when international industrial monoliths were building upon the ruins of defeated nations. She was a bride of two days when the World Science Council, under fierce pressure from a number of vested interests, reluctantly recommended 'some control' of bio-technical experimentation and the further development of electronic brains.

'What a black day that was!' she reminisced to me once. 'We stared at the news screens and could not believe what we saw. Our own leaders betrayed us for a pottage of government grants and industrial contracts. It was a small step for the governments to take that recommendation and ban the research altogether. The unions opposed it. The churches opposed it. Every hick in the street who'd ever seen a horror movie about mad scientists opposed it. We never had a chance.'

The laws were passed; the scientists informed of their ramifications. The bio-labs were closed or converted to more desirable pursuits. From now on, the dying twentieth century assured the world, science would exist only for the betterment of man. Martin Kraus, who knew when to bend with the wind, promptly amassed a fortune in weapons research.

Bio-medicine went underground, and flourished there in

a way which the defenders of human bodily integrity had never feared in their worst nightmares.

'Underground,' Katherine triumphed, 'we acknowledged no controls. We tried everything. We tried things we'd have been hanged for in the civilised scientific community. We took unpardonable chances.

'Fortunately, Martin was nothing less than a genius, and there were others almost as brilliant. In one lifetime, we turned amorphous living matter into functioning androids.

'In one lifetime ...' She shook her head. 'It's incredible. Even to me. Even now.'

There were hundreds of androids now, trying to come out from underground, to fight their way into power, to carve their place in a world that denied them the right to exist.

Tired as I was, I could not sleep. Too many memories, too many emotions were tearing at me. I made a slow pilgrimage through the old mansion, to the library where I had been taught, to the spacious parlour stacked with music tapes and electronic games, to the patio singing with crickets and shining with dew; finally, reluctantly, to the subterranean lab.

It was not used as a lab any more. All our equipment had long ago been transferred to our larger facilities under the innocuous Devereux Institute of Agriculture.

Here was only a shell now. A memory. The débris had been cleared, the broken glass removed, the charred files emptied, the dead given reverence. The rest remained, black and ugly. A memorial, Katherine had said. A reminder to the conscience of the world. Seventeen people had died in that lab, unable to escape the fire because of their own unbreakable security system. Martin Kraus had been among them.

A memorial, yes, I thought. But a reminder? To whom? To the species most gifted in destroying its genius, butcher-

ing its leaders and cutting the wings off those who would fly? To a race that would build its cook-fires at the base of Prometheus' rock, and never bother to look up? Why try to remind them of anything?

A shopping trip into the city provided my first chance to contact Taggart. He wanted to see me, he said; a lot had been happening.

I argued. It was dangerous. I did not think I was being followed, but one could never be sure.

He would take care of security, he assured me; and of course he did.

He was not surprised that I had so far obtained little substantial information.

'Lady Katherine may welcome you home,' he said, 'but it will be a while until she turns her back on you.'

Still, there were some useful things I could tell him: the nature and extent of estate security, comings and goings, and, of course, my deep suspicion that the heart of the Kraus operation was located elsewhere. Some of what I told him was true, and some was not. And my deep suspicion had long been his, too.

'I know there's another centre,' he said. 'Burrows was on to it, I think.'

'Was?'

'He's dead. I don't regret him, but I wish he hadn't been so pig-headed, and had passed on his information as he got it. He was going to throw it at me in one great egotistical lump, I suppose. Bloody damned fool ...'

'Have you replaced him?'

'Not yet.' He sat down, a trifle wearily. 'This whole operation is going to hell, you know,' he reflected. 'Burrows dead. Shannon going absolutely nowhere—it seems Doctor Beckman has lost a number of his files—the State Department's having fits ...'

'Well,' I said dryly, 'there's still me.'

'Yes.' He laughed roughly, and held out his hand, drawing me to his side. 'There's still you; and you, love, are all I've got.'

It was not easy to meet those utterly relentless eyes; but I did. I made no effort to conceal my desire; rather it concealed everything else, even from me.

He tilted my face and held it, kissing me lightly and teasingly, undoing buttons with a quick, practised hand, and I melted at his touch like a piece of wax.

Love, according to the poets, flowers on windswept beaches, in rose gardens and candle-lit cabarets. No one ever painted a nymph on a studio couch in a second-class government office, naked among the typewriters and filing cabinets. Nobody ever wrote sonnets about people like us.

Well, I thought, we didn't really count as lovers, anyway. We were enemies, and this game that was more than a game was likely to end with one of us dead. Love had nothing to do with it.

I had lost track of time; I suppose I had slept. The city outside was dark, the shades were drawn. Taggart had dressed, and was talking on the telephone.

He hung up, and came and sat on the couch beside me.

'I think you had better get dressed,' he said.

'Well,' I smiled, 'I was thinking about it.'

'And then I think we had better have a very long talk.'

'About what?'

'Lady Katherine. Androids. Hidden laboratories. And other related matters.'

I sat up languidly, groping around for my clothes. 'I thought we already exhausted that subject.'

'You're very clever, Christi,' he said, 'and very cool. But it's over. I know who you are, and I know that you're a double agent. So just get dressed, love, and don't argue.'

I turned on him my most accomplished look of wide-

eyed innocence. 'Jason! How can you——?'

He ignored that. 'If you help me,' he went on calmly, 'I'll guarantee you a quick, clean execution.'

'Thank you so much,' I said coldly.

'Considering the alternatives, Christi, that is not an empty offer.'

No, I thought. It certainly was not. I looked at him, trying not to remember what had passed between us.

'I am sorry,' he said quietly.

No doubt he was.

'Will you at least tell me how you concocted such a mad idea?' I asked him.

'We knew Lady Katherine was training agents and getting them into NAIC. We caught some. Others are under suspicion. Some, of course, it never occurred to us to suspect, and I'm afraid there's still a lot of those around.'

'But you suspected me? Why?'

'I didn't. Not until things started to go wrong, and I started asking myself how the hell it came about that when I needed to crack the Kraus organisation I had, stashed away among the pencil sharpeners, exactly the right person at the right time.'

'I don't believe in luck. Luck is an accident that somebody made happen—and if I didn't, then somebody else bloody well did.'

'Once we started digging, we found other things. Little things, but they all helped. Up until eight years ago, you didn't seem to exist. I mean, your records are all there, of course, but nothing else. The towns you supposedly lived in, the schools you supposedly attended—nobody remembers you.'

'I was an unassuming child.'

'Perhaps. Anyway you were an invisible one. Then another bit of vital information came to light. Christina Fosse wasn't just a family friend. She was Martin Kraus' illegiti-

mate daughter—his only child, the child Katherine never had, but raised as her own. She was reported killed in that mysterious fire, but of course she wasn't dead at all. She was spirited off to Canada, to assume a new identity, to make her way, finally, into the ranks of NAIC, to be ready whenever we might need her.

'It was beautifully planned. It almost worked.'

'Pure speculation,' I said.

'So far, yes. I needed one piece of solid, tangible evidence. I got it—about ten minutes ago.'

'The phone call?'

'Yes. From my friend Dolan. I sent him to Tibet to track down your irresponsible cousin. She never really believed that you were dead, and of course, she identified your picture.'

'Of her own free will?'

He shrugged. 'She needed little persuasion. She hates spies the way a drunkard's children sometimes hate alcohol.'

'I see.' I went to the window. The city lights, blurred in smog, lay in a lonely arc around me. It was an ugly, violent city, and I had never liked it, yet now it held a strange, poignant beauty.

I did not want to die. Not yet. I had lived so very little.

And now the thought lifted its head and winked at me. It had lain there a long time, curled like a snake at the surface of my consciousness.

I turned back to Taggart. 'You're going to kill me, or turn me over to the State Police, is that it?'

'That's how it is, love. There's no other way.'

'And if I offered you another way?'

'To play double agent for us?' he smiled. 'Not a chance. You're committed. Only the blindest of blind idiots would trust you for a second.'

'That wasn't what I meant.'

'What then?'

It was my turn to smile. 'Join us,' I said softly.

For the first time since I had met Jason Taggart, I finally saw something shake him. It went through him like a single whap along a taut wire, and then it was gone. He laughed.

'You brazen, diabolical little bitch,' he said. 'What possible reason could I have for joining you?'

'Why do men climb mountains?' I retorted.

It was almost dawn when I drove back to the Kraus estate. I drove like a madwoman, drunk with triumph, dizzy from the vistas that had opened into my life. Oh, I knew the risk; I was not so blind as that. But the risk was like a distant storm—a thing to be watched, but not feared.

Lady Katherine thought otherwise.

'No!' she stormed at me. 'No, no, no! I'll not permit it!'

'Katherine, you've worked for five years trying to get someone on to Taggart's team. Now you've got that, and Taggart, too. Do you know what he can do for us? He can get our people into the State Department, into governorships, into the judiciary, into every military base in North America! Kath, we can be in power in five years!'

'Or dead in five weeks.' She shook her head. 'You're asking me to trust my life's work—mine and a thousand others'—and everything my family died for—to that Soho gutter rat? No, Christi. Never.'

'He could destroy us,' I agreed. 'I know that. But he won't.'

'And how can you be so sure of that?' she challenged.

'I know him. I know how he thinks.'

'He's a mercenary. And mercenaries can't be trusted.'

'Perhaps not. But mercenaries can be bought.'

'Bought?' she said scornfully. 'With what? We couldn't begin to pay him what the State Department is paying him.'

'We don't have to. He doesn't care about money, anyway. Oh, he likes to eat well and travel first class and be able to afford expensive women. But that's it. Money, in the sense of amassing wealth, is meaningless to him.'

'Then what are we to offer him?'

'The one thing he really wants. Challenge.'

'Oh, Christi, for God's sake . . . !'

'Listen to me! It's a game to Taggart. A fantastic, complex, immensely deadly game. He doesn't care about NAIC, and he won't care about us. But to work for us—to take a small, desperate, condemned organisation and forge it into an instrument of power—that is a challenge which NAIC can never match!'

'And if you're wrong?'

'Isn't it a chance worth taking?'

'No.' She stopped pacing and turned to face me. 'No, Christi. We're too vulnerable.'

'We've always been vulnerable. We've survived by taking unpardonable chances; you said so yourself.'

'No.' She was like a rock. 'I won't permit it.'

There was a long, sick silence. Ashen, Katherine sank into a chair, her fingers stuffed against her mouth.

'Oh, Christi, Christi, I'm so sorry . . . ! Christi, I didn't mean it . . .'

Oh, but you did, I thought sadly. And it will be there, between us, for a long, long time.

'I know you didn't mean it, Kath,' I said quietly. 'But the question's been raised. Maybe it had better be answered. Maybe we had better find out what we really are about.'

She said nothing. She only sat, with tears trickling down her face, while I dialled Taggart's number.

It was quiet in the lab, quiet with the immense peace of the dead. The hurt had eased, I knew Katherine loved me; I would have to be content with that.

And I had earned my place in the world, and I had Taggart. I was happy.

I walked through the ruins, pausing for another thoughtful look at the quiet village of urns: they were all here—Martin Kraus, his assistants, his brother, his mistress, and the angel-haired child they had all adored. Christina Fosse.

If only, I thought wistfully, if only there were some way I could tell them that we were going to win.

THE ROENTGEN REFUGEES

by

IAN WATSON

The stories of cataclysm, of global catastrophe, form a considerable and honourable proportion of the entire science fiction scene. After the dry ironies of 'To the Pump Room with Jane' in New Writings in SF 26, Ian Watson turns his attention to the side effects, seldom previously noticed, of one form of cataclysm. And, might not these side effects be terminal effects?

THE ROENTGEN REFUGEES

AURORAS flickered overhead—dancing spooks tricked out in rose and violet and orange veils. The daylight barely held them at bay. Every night they flared across the sky in their full ... should you say Glory?—yes, it was glorious ... or Rage? yes, it had been rageful. Sheets of mocking pseudo-flame putting all but the brightest stars to flight, preluding that not so distant day of Nebulosity when the extent of the universe visible from Earth would be a few light years at most, full of those swirling skirts of thin bright gases.

They rode a military halftrack driven by a soldier called Kruger, bosted by the vulgar Major Woltjer.

'Did not ought to have been Sirius that blew up!'

Woltjer glared over his shoulder at the four of them, accusing them of incompetence—though they weren't astronomers or physicists.

'This here is Smidtdorp Farm we're moving on to.' His eyes lingered on Andrea Diversley—pressed so tight up against the Indian geneticist, with her arm round his waist. Such shameless affront to his Afrikaner principles in the presence of other whites! Woltjer's gaze raped and whipped the Englishwoman for it. Yet apartheid was such an unimportant thing nowadays, when you came to think of it.

'Did not ought to have been! What do you think, Miss Diversley?'

'True, Major, the Dog Star played a dog's trick on us.'

'Well, did it not so?'

Smitsdorp Farm seemed to be recovering its grass cover adequately by contrast with the barrens they'd passed. Far too adequately perhaps in some places. Those would have to be looked at later—the soil, the insects, the micro-organisms all assayed. Right now, their route lay towards the low hills where some of the irradiated seed that had been left unprotected and then sown in control strips later, was producing unexpectedly high yields.

Woltjer tried his best to shame Andrea into untwining from the Indian; but she only shrugged.

'It isn't my field of study, Major.'

His neck tired of twisting round and he stared ahead again over the rolling ravaged acres of farmland that would never support grazing herds again.

'Scientists!'

What did he mean by that? wondered Simeon Merrick, who was sitting behind Andrea and her Indian next to the taciturn, defensively chauvinistic Swede, Gunnar Marholm. That scientists of any breed whatever bore some responsibility for events in the interior of the Dog Star?

Disaster. Yes. But amazingly, in the event, it hadn't been anything that Mankind had done. After so much scare-mongering about the risks of nuclear war, the running down of resources, overpopulation, pollution—all kinds of doom sketched out for the Nineteen Eighties—disaster when it had come (as everyone obscurely sensed it must—that was one constant in the equation!) came wholly unpredictably, from a point wholly external to Man's affairs.

Yet how could it be external? Was it not an illusion to think of it as external?

What hath Man wrought, that God in His Wisdom should permit—no! ordain this cosmic event? That He should so dislocate the order of the heavens and the order of life on Earth?

What hath Man wrought, ten years ago, that should finally tip the scales of God's estimation? Simeon hunted back through the decade before for some exemplary evil—that eluded him.

What earthly events could have prompted the terrible flaring of the Dog Star, as absurdly shocking for the astronomers as for this Afrikaner soldier Woltjer? What sequence of sins? Perhaps simply, too many people had stopped believing in God?

Ridiculous! No single event or set of events could decide God's mind. (Yet, recall the Cities of the Plain, Simeon, remember Sodom and Gomorrah! Those had reached a certain point, attained a critical mass of sinfulness—they had gone too far.)

Surely the modern God was no such petty dictator, petulantly setting fire to a star to scourge his Sons and Daughters?

It just had to be the whole trend of human history. Of accumulated sin. Sins such as the South African Reich. Sins of exploitation and segregation. And yet, and yet, fretted Simeon, wherefore Dear Lord Thy choice of this special moment in time? And why wasn't it the Whites who had died? Why wasn't it the Rich and Powerful who perished? Why was it the Blacks, the Browns and Yellows? The Poor, the Wretched of the Earth? Why was it they who had disappeared? Why was it the Major Woltjers of this world who came through, going down the deep mines that their wealth came from, for the first time in their lives, and sheltering there while above ground the black miners took the peak dose of 8,500 roentgens, and died? The same pattern was repeated all over the globe. The embarrassing querulous voices of Underdevelopment were stilled for ever. It was the developed people of the world who had the resources and the technology to survive. The 'Cleansing Operation', he'd heard the supernova referred to in

Jo'burg by men like Woltjer. Cleansing Operation. All political and moral embarrassments cleared away by the charged particles that followed on the heels of that flare of light, which itself gave only the briefest months of warning.

The Clean-Up. Why?

And still Woltjer was angry at Andrea's tenderness to this Indian, who'd had the impertinence to survive, and who now accepted these white liberal caresses with such greedy nonchalance.

'Did not ought to have been!'

'No indeed,' Gunnar Marholm said brusquely, to silence him. 'It did not, but it was. So are we to blame, somehow? Is science? Don't you know it all happened several times before in Earth's history? Look in the geological record, man! You'll find mass extinctions of fauna there. A probable acute dose of 500 roentgens every 300 million years. A single dose of as high as 25,000 roentgens once since Precambrian times. Agreed, it was an unfortunate star to explode. Being so near us. Giving such a high peak dosage.'

Simeon stared out of the window at the recuperating earth. The blessed sight of renewed chlorophyll. But among and around, a hundred cattle skeletons, tattered hide still clinging on white bones.

And scattered with them, they were now passing by—and crunching over—recognisable human skeletons. Kruger drove the halftrack right over them without making any effort to detour.

'The universe doesn't owe us a living, Major,' murmured the Swede.

Yet how the Lord had helped those who helped themselves! Oh yes—those who had helped themselves to the fruits of the earth all along had their great granaries to hide in from His wrath—and hide successfully they did! Sweden

had done all right out of the Clean Up too—over ninety-five per cent of her population saved. Not that Sweden could be accused of having 'helped herself', compared with other developed countries. The record was honourable in that respect. Was this why Gunnar Marholm asked so icily chauvinistic? Simeon wondered. Because he felt that the quality of his own people's survival was tainted by the survival of the real pirates of the globe? Those who weathered the storm a shade less successfully than social democratic Sweden, to a lesser degree of antiseptic perfection—yet still magisterially successful beside India with one half of one per cent of her people saved, or Nigeria with one tenth of one per cent. Britain, prime ex-colonist, had saved 48 per cent of her population. America had saved 56 per cent, mainly Whites. This same South Africa they were riding through now had scored 80 per cent—of its white population.

The Lord helps those that help themselves. The Meek and Poor are burnt like chaff.

Is God then illogical? Inconsistent? Yet surely it couldn't be that it had nothing to do with God? From this thought Simeon recoiled. God could neither overlook, nor could he commit illogic or evil. There must be a Purpose.

One half of one per cent—no, India hadn't done at all well.

Hence the caresses of the Englishwoman, guilt that could only assuage itself by surrendering herself erotically to Dr Subbaiah Sharma ...

'Geological record, Gunnar?' Simeon argued, worried and upset—while the halftrack crunched over the bones of these Zulu or Xhosa people. 'The only comparable event I know is the Bethlehem supernova—the Star of the Magi which God kindled to tell us of the first coming of His Son. Now there comes this second.'

'Second what? Second star, second coming? Ha! A ran-

dom accident. Let it have happened fifty years ago and only the merest remnant of the human race would have pulled through. Too few maybe. As it is——'

'Yes?' cried Andrea, hugging Dr Sharma to her, twisting the knife in her conscience. 'And as it is?'

'As it is,' Marholm shrugged—for they had been through the same argument before, 'assuredly several hundreds of millions survived. Maybe as many as six hundred million. The populations of the developed countries, by and large. All the statistics aren't in,' he reminded her.

Sharma laughed. His presence—a walking corpse's, a ghost's. Living reminder of the for ever dispossessed.

'It seems that the meek haven't inherited the Earth after all, as your Bible promised—except as this bonemeal around us!'

Andrea hugged him, loving him for the whole abruptly terminated agony of underdevelopment. She herself had weathered the cosmic storm down in Goblin's Pit near Bath in England, in the Wansdyke Commercial Depository, as a Priority A Survivor, class of Agricultural Botanist.

'But hell,' blurted Woltjer, just when it seemed the matter was losing its momentum, 'it did come as a kind of blessing, let's be frank about it. I mean, population problem's solved! We don't need worry about squeezing ourselves off the planet! Using up all our resources. See what I mean?'

'Oh yes,' cried Sharma. 'Yes I do see, sir. Was it not generous of us three billion poor people to move aside out of your way?'

See, he identifies himself as a corpse. Yet his erotic clamourings nightly deny this—unless we regard it as a form of necrophilia in reverse.

'Oh Subby! Please!'

But oh, how the mere presence of the Indian scientist spelt imperfection and untidiness in a God-given Clearance

Programme, to Major Woltjer's mind!

'Many more creatures besides us coloured people need not feel guilty at taking up room any more!' And oh, how he was exploiting Andrea with his demands. 'Such as all large mammals, good thing Major Woltjer? Byebye elephants, giraffes and camels. Byebye whales and seals and dolphins. Byebye crows and eagles, hawks and doves. Byebye byebye.'

Oh Lord God, Who in Thy mercy didst send the plagues upon Egypt to save Thy people, did you also send this plague from the Dog Star to save Your people—that this human race of Thine might not entirely destroy itself by its own hand, as seemed so very likely, and thus rob Thy Earth of its fairest crown of creation? Too soon, Dear Lord, too soon, to terminate Thy grand creation!

'Second Bethlehem? Second Deliverance?' Simeon murmured aloud. And Subbaiah Sharma greedily caught up his murmurs.

'Those that have, shall have more, Simeon. That is the New Bible. Those that have little, shall have nothing. Even the dignity of burial is denied.'

The halftrack crushed another Zulu or Xhosa skeleton. Many lay bunched about here, as though a migration had passed over the land: a resumption of the Bantu migrations of old.

Woltjer merely smirked.

'God helps those as help themselves.'

They passed through heaps of dry bones that the new grass was forcing its way between: a thousand cattle skeletons, a thousand human skeletons. Lo, though we drive through the valley of dry bones, let us fear no evil, prayed Simeon to God, Who must know.

Anonymous bonemeal wearing ragged shirts and ragged trousers.

'Did not ought to be in this zone!' grumbled Woltjer.

'Wasn't authorised for Bantu you know, this zone. Must have thought they could make the jump on us when we evacuated!'

'Maybe their only remaining dignity,' the Indian said quietly, 'was to be walking across this land that was once theirs, when the roentgen storm arrived. To die saying this is our land after all, now you can't ever take it away again. Because there's nobody to take it away from any more!'

'You can see the cultivations now,' Kruger pointed.

As they worked among the queerly prolific corn and mealies and sorghum, Woltjer strode about kicking bones.

Kruger left his driver's seat, approaching Andrea and Sharma with a leer on his face.

'You think there'll be mutations? You think there's mutations in insects and things? Read about mutants once in a book. What monsters there might be after an atomic war: What miscegenations.'

Sharma eyed him distastefully.

'But it wasn't a nuclear war, sir. So no radioactive isotopes lie around. The radioactivity problem from isotopes made by cosmic rays is a very secondary matter. There shan't be any monsters breeding to roam the Earth.'

'Is that so?'

'Sorry, nothing so interesting. Just a kill-off process. Most exposed fauna. From now on it will be a world of very little things. Man will be big and overwhelming. Otherwise insects and micro-organisms and of course some fish in the sea. But mainly man. Six-foot tall man towering over it all. Seeds are highly radioresistant—so man will manage to feed himself on fish and cereals. A few million more will die before enough food comes available. In the more impoverished countries, needless to say.'

'That so?'

'Then Western Man will have the planet to himself. Euro-

pean Man, American Man, Man of the Future. What a rich technological civilisation he will enjoy in another few decades, when all this unpleasantness is no longer remembered—no more social aberrations to disturb the order of things!’

‘Don’t, Subby. Don’t demean yourself talking to him. You’re worth ten of these Afrikaners.’

Petulantly, Sharma shook off Andrea’s hand.

‘Ten Indians—and a dog! A Westerner’s dog used to eat ten Indians’ food, did you know? I wonder how many pet cats and dogs were saved in the shelters of the West?’

‘There were rules, Subby. Strict rules. But there had to be some kind of Noah’s Ark operation.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘For chickens and pigs and beasts like that. If only to restock.’

‘How many Indians was an English chicken worth?’

‘But we lost our people too, Subby!’

‘Yes, your Indians and West Indians. How careless of you!’

‘We lost our white people too.’

He shrugged.

‘The working class.’

Andrea turned back to her botany. Her eyes seemed moist but Simeon couldn’t be sure, for just then Kruger let out a surprised shout and sprinted back to the halftrack. He brought out a couple of rifles fitted with sights and tossed one to Major Woltjer.

Simeon stared at the hills, shading his eyes against the bright African sun—and shading his mind against those dancing veils of heaven above the fleeting cottonball clouds.

He saw a ragged column of raggy people trekking down from the direction of Broederskop, led by a tall bearded white man carrying a red and white flag flying from a gilded Latin cross.

As they moved closer Simeon worked out the flag design. It was a white skull on a blood-red background.

Alpha Canis Majoris A, alias Sirius the Dog Star—an energy spendthrift not quite nine light years distant from the Earth, twice as massive as the Sun and twenty-five times as bright, though only one-third as dense—hardly a candidate for supernovahood from its place in the Hertzsprung–Russell diagram—exploded nevertheless, discharging between 10^{48} and 10^{50} ergs as cosmic rays, producing massive flux at the top of Earth's atmosphere and a worldwide radiation dosage at ground level, over a three-day period, peaking at 8,500 roentgens—whereas the usual natural background dosage per year is 0.03 roentgens...

Three billion human beings died as a consequence. Those who were unsheltered.

Most birds and beasts and shallow-water fishes died. Unsheltered.

Most fauna was defoliated (but would recuperate asexually or through seeds and spores).

The sky flamed rose and green and violet with charged particles trapped in Earth's magnetic field. The sky had never been more beautiful.

However, few stood up to praise the glory in the sky.

In a million years time, the reason why might appear in the record of the rocks ...

'I thought you didn't grant shelter to any Africans, Major?' said Sharma innocently.

'Africans? What Africans? We are the Africans. Is what Afrikaner means! Bantu, is what you mean.'

'Terminology of a twisted mind.'

'No, it is accurate. We was here before the Bantu.'

'And you're still here after them.'

'So I had thought!'

Woltjer grasped the rifle tighter, squinting through the telescopic sights.

'You're not just going to shoot for no reason?'

'Naw, Miss Diversely. I'm looking at them. But they're crossing a non-permitted zone, those Bantu.'

'A what?' cackled Sharma. 'You must be crazy!'

'Unless servants or hired labour with passes.'

'Oh fine—that lets me in! I quality as hired labour, don't I? Thank you for reassuring me Major.'

'Subby——!'

'Yes, all right, Andrea.' Yes, it would be all right for Subby later on, thought Simeon, with a smirk of the mind. Subby would sublimate his humiliations later on. Then, feeling ashamed of himself, Simeon caught a fold of flesh between his fingers, and pinched hard till it ached.

'Unh, I know the fellow with the flag. Frensch is his name, was a pastor. I thought he died. Must have found shelter. Wonder where he's been, past years?'

'Kaffir-lover,' the Major added.

'It looks as though they plan to come down through the plantings, Major.'

'So I see, Mr Marholm. Spoil the plantings. Trample them with their dirty feet.'

Woltjer swung his rifle away from the column and fired off a shot that crashed horribly, leaving a deaf silence behind it. Andrea covered her ears, bottling up the noise of the gunshot in her conscience.

Marholm laid a restraining hand on Woltjer's arm.

'I'm a good shot, don't worry. I aim to miss. Send them round the plantings. I'm just watching them now.'

The column did veer away, to angle round one corner of the plantings.

'Good enough,' grunted Woltjer, lowering his rifle. 'Recognise one of the Bantu too, Stephen Ambola. Had trouble with him before. A religious agitator like Alice

Lenishina, remember her Native African Church?’

The gilded cross, the white skull flag, tottered round the perimeter of the cultivated area and headed their way again.

At first, the column struck Simeon as a satire upon nineteenth-century explorations of Africa, with its white leader bearing aloft the symbol of empire, pursued by a gang of skinny black bodies. Then his vision readjusted and the troop was ... a wretched medieval crusade. Not of knights and squires. But of starving people. Of diseased people. Burning with blind faith. A Children’s crusade. A crusade of innocents and wretches from the corner of some medieval horror by Hieronymus Bosch.

‘What you wanting?’ bellowed Woltjer. ‘Frensch, I know you, what you doing here?’

The bearded man handed cross and flag to the African behind him, who gripped it with a fierce determination and rammed it into the soil. Most of the followers squatted down exhausted, sharing out food. Stephen Ambola and Frensch approached.

‘Put those damn guns away, who you wanting to kill? We not going to attack you.’

‘Bantu shouldn’t be on this land. Government Experimental Farm. Can’t risk trampling the crops with their dirty feet. Get them off, Frensch.’

‘What’s it matter?’ cried Ambola. ‘Old feuds! Forget them. We have the News. Don’t we?’ He turned to Frensch.

‘As though it wasn’t staring us in the face!’ Frensch raked over a human skull with his boot, then gestured vaguely and derisively at the coloured veils flickering above the scudding clouds.

‘News? What news?’ Anxiety clutched Simeon now. He could be tipped any way in his beliefs, out in this vale of bones, in the face of this raggy anachronistic band of people. Fundamentalists. Revivalists. Fanatics. Yes indeed.

But had they thought out any better explanation than himself? Or than the Pope—whom the bulk of Vatican masonry sheltered along with his College of Cardinals from the roentgen storm?

The Papal Encyclical *In Hoc Tempore Mortis*, issued three months afterwards, had been a temporising rather than a mortifying document. It injected placid banalities into an implacable situation. Pious wishes for the success of the Food and Agriculture Organisation and whatever other civilised bodies had survived, which was the whole trouble. The Pope's message was simply a programme for survival. It left the whole religious dilemma untouched: why and wherefore God had allowed the meek and humble to perish, and the rich and strong to survive. Why and wherefore He had refashioned the Eye of the Needle so that it would only accept rich merchants laden with baggage, and exclude the starving hordes to perish outside the city walls.

This skinny African in torn shirt and shorts and broken plastic flipflop sandals, with burning intelligent eyes, stared into Simeon's face.

'News for those smug in their survival!' he sang. 'They did not survive. They are damned by God. Same as you. Same as we. Every man, woman and child alive today anywhere on Earth is damned. We are all damned. This is Hell now. We are the damned souls. God took the blessed, left his damned behind. He was merciful—he saved so MANY. Nearly all. But He couldn't save all and still be the just God. Those who live today are those He couldn't redeem any way. ANY WAY.'

'Shut your mother, Ambola,' Woltjer snapped. But Ambola wouldn't.

'Who are you Damned Souls, anyway?'

Andrea Diversley's voice begged:

'We're a team from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.'

'So South Africa's in the U.N.? Don't miracles just happen? All the miracles of Hell!'

'We're botanists, plant geneticists. The irradiated seeds ...'

'Ha! Cultivating the plains of Hell. Wasting your time, pretty woman.'

Woltjer struck out wildly at Ambola, but Ambola skipped aside.

'Apologies, baas. Forgot, Hell still has its policemen!'

'I became aware of the News, you see, Damned Souls,' Frensch interrupted this squabble loudly. 'Blessèd Souls in the skies, look at them, you can even see them in broad daylight.'

His finger jerked aloft, pointing at those fearful veils of glory.

'Yes,' whispered Simeon in horror, 'I do see now.'

'Simeon! What are you saying?'

'But I do see, Gunnar. The Pope was wrong. *In Hoc Tempore Mortis*—so inadequate. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death ...'

'Don't you see, Damned Man, it is the valley of the shadow of life we walk through! That life of souls up there! Blessèd life casts its shadow upon us here below.'

'So charged particles are souls?' laughed the Swede scornfully. 'Now I've heard everything. It's hysteria. You could expect messianic cults to spring up like weeds in these circumstances, Simeon. But Simeon, we've got a job to do.'

But Frensch faced the Swede squarely.

'NOT a Messiah cult, Damned Man. For there never will be any Messiah. The Messiah has come and chosen and departed. Left us behind Him. Yet the authority of the Church still holds—only, our faith is now not in salvation but damnation. A Church of the Abandonment. The bleached skull flying from the Cross. So we must go forth

to waken people—so smug in their survival, when they have already been weighed in the balance and found wanting!’

‘A Church of the Abandonment—yes, that fits,’ Simeon murmured. ‘Else, God would have acted illogically. Would be unjust. And that can’t be!’

Frensch stood forward to grasp Simeon by the shoulder.

‘Welcome to Damnation, Damned Friend. Help spread this news. We must move on to the towns and other lands now. To tell the Damned of their Damnation.’

‘Simeon!’ the Swede begged. ‘This is more ridiculous than any of the guilty contortions Andrea performs.’

The Englishwoman darted him a poisonous glance, moving closer to the Indian geneticist till her body brushed his.

‘It was just a natural disaster, Simeon, don’t you see?’ soothed Gunnar. ‘As has happened before. As happened to the dinosaurs. Yet we can understand and grasp our fate, unlike the great reptiles. That is our humanity!’

Shaking his head, Simeon refused to understand.

These petty scratchings in the devastated soil—these experimental plantings, so called . . . A valley of dry bones, where the wretched and the Meek had been taken away—into Heaven, to become those dancing ghostly veils of beauty above the clouds! That symbol of Damnation planted in the crumbling soil: the gilded wooden cross with the breeze fluttering out the white skull and the red of Hell’s spiritual fires that burn but consume not. And the ragged, fervent Survivors—these Crusaders!

It was the Last Crusade of All: a crusade of total faith and total despair.

Woltjer shook his head stupidly as though he’d been swimming and his ears were full of water. He brandished his rifle. He blustered. No one paid much attention.

Andrea twined her arms round Sharma’s neck, kissing

him furiously before the gaze of the Afrikaners.

Gunnar Marholm had retreated into his cold northern fastness of the mind, blindly gazing across the African soil at the glint of white bones.

Above the clouds, ghost veils danced in a rainbow joy of colours.

Then there was such silence, but for the faint sigh of wind. No birds or beasts anywhere.

'Did not ought to have been Sirius!' barked Major Woltjer into a silence that gulped his words down as a cow a fly, squinting round him, useless rifle at the ready, where no threat loomed.

The Church of the Abandonment squatted silent, eating or resting.

Frensch and Ambola went back to their standard and rested by it.

After a while Simeon too walked over and sat under it.

There was the wind.

And the wild veils aflame in the sky, violet, green and rose.

And the emptiness of the earth.

AMSTERDAM

by

RITCHIE SMITH

After his co-writing partnership with Thomas Penman—'The Seafarer' in New Writings in SF 26 and 'The Banks of the Nile' in New Writings in SF 28—Ritchie Smith now brings his powers of nostalgic evocation to bear on the confrontation, the misunderstandings, the efforts at empathy, of two people from different cultures. Yet both cultures inhabit the same world, a future world brought vividly alive for our delight. And, too, it is clear what this future world is not, as one character puts it: '... this era is Calvary for us all.'

AMSTERDAM

ONE

IN the Old Town of Stockholm are narrow, paved stairways, overhung by gloomily shuttered-up shopfronts. Their gold leafwork lettering peels away like rind.

Strolling, the couple passed between stone walls spotted with fans of yellow light from the bull's-eye lenses lit up with gas flames that served as streetlamps. The ghostly light played in dark alleys empty of everything except the echoes of their own footsteps and occasionally raised voices. The woman smelt seasalt in the fog-speckled air; through freezing mist she saw the winking amber jewels of fluorescing signs; and harbourward, heard great ships hoot at freight submarines, as jet noise ground threateningly down to her from the brightening air. Suddenly, she felt very insignificant, and hated it.

Even in that dim Swedish dawn, after the vulgar 'garden party' held under the United States Embassy's septuplet of geodesic domes—ballooning plastic domes not unlike huge, luminous Chinese lanterns—and after leaving its boredoms, going with him to talk of astronautics, Dürer woodcuts, the Pacific coast of Japan, to talk over nursed cups of percolated coffee laced with cream and whisky, sitting stiff amid the stainless-steel decor of her hotel suite—Even after their night, of unsuccessful lovemaking on its huge waterbed,

Françoise Narcola was *still* animatedly talking with him, her concern quite naked.

'... So you don't want to make it with me, see Amsterdam? Well, how often *have* you wandered about Holland, then?'

'Never, of course,' Sanger said to her. 'Because when you can say to some lounge full of bored faces that you've just got in from the Martian planet-port ... 2001 it's been christened, in the Syrtis Major—what is anything on this whole earth to that? We have got our hands on the stars.'

A drop of dew trickled down his flushed cheek.

She said, 'But what do you want?'

Michael Sanger's brief listless shrug dismissed much too much. Françoise frowned, and tapped her fingers on the emerald silk tautening and slackening on her thighs. She shook her head to some interior prompting, and her hair turned momentarily blonde. Then she bit out sharply, 'Why not? Why don't you come with me—are you so fearful of the spaceflight arm of Big Brother? Or is it inner-directedness, simple indolence or what?'

'Well,' he defended feebly, breaking his long-legged stride to side-glance at her, 'I have been in Iberia, with our Catherine. Saw orange groves around Seville, I think that's where Cervantes lived and wrote. I saw the wedding-cakes of baroque and rococo stone you find in southern Spain. I quite liked——'

'But as you've just told me, simpleminded: only that once!'

'... Thank you,' Michael Sanger sneered, almost goaded out of his diffidence: but then he turned away as negatively as ever.

They passed a fruiterer's shop, a pawnbroker's, a bank. As he slid onwards, as long and gaunt as his own shadow that skittered on those ringing, black but frost-spangled cobbles, he thought of this North, of dynamite and Nobel prizes, an

Ibsen drama, and of *her* ancestors; he was an orphan, a State ward. Already, he was suspecting just how often she overwhelmed extreme contradictions in logic by sheer force of personality; several times in his hearing Françoise had assaulted his common sense, either with sincerity or radiant charm. 'Lies' made him flinch.

An old woman in a pink satin gown emerged from a basement, and stood beneath a wrought-iron lampstandard, watching them go.

'Anyway, Françoise,' Sanger began again, hurt, but made genuinely uneasy by her arguments, 'why should I do the gypsy bit? Look, I am a global villager ...'

'Words. Words. Words,' she said, sarcastically, striding away.

'Aren't I? I fly to other worlds. I work in mathematics, a real international language, and I do it well. I meet many interesting people. I read some, as you know. I see a lot of things, beautiful, ugly, banal or strange. So I think my life is quite full.'

The Frenchwoman smiled secretly. The rapid rhythm of her pacing slowed. 'You see,' she explained, 'I've developed this quirky sense of obligation towards you, because there's something in you that I want to free, Michael. Yes, it's the burden of the artist, this prophet motive. I want, besides that, to go picking hyacinths again, with you, where the Zuider Zee once was. And show a few subtle things to the "I" behind your eye.'

Including perhaps yourself ...

Françoise Narcola was a painter, and a wintertime exile from the Camargue. She wore her blue-black hair coiffured in short, neat Grecian-goddess curls, and she'd ornamented herself with the gold rings and silver clasp and bangles her egotism delighted so in displaying. She was as fragile as a humming-bird, and as quick and flighty;

Françoise wore, now, a royal purple Gipsy gown to flaunt rich, colourful paisley patterns.

Sometimes she chain-smoked, and was theatrically emotional; she usually stormed on from there into improvised soliloquies full of pique or exaltation or nothing-at-all, in every dialect from Chelsea English to apache French ...

Turning tiredly from the cabin window, Sanger tugged at her slack sleeve. 'Françoise——? What do you paint?'

A hostess sauntered past, with gins and lager and limes on a black plastic tray. A poised moment, as Françoise's face froze into thoughtfulness; then she melted into chuckling, cocking her pretty head and warmly gushing words. 'Images. Of what is concrete, on the one level. Like, apples and a bunch of Emperor grapes; or landscapes of sunlit cornfields; or sometimes stagey society portraits. Also, I hope, subtly, to fill my work with an idea about life.'

'I see,' he lied.

She leaned forward. 'Sometimes there is so much *life* in me, like fire; it's hard to explain, I can't share it verbally at all. Come see an exhibition of mine some day.'

'I'd like that.'

'And I'd like to net the four winds and keep them like a genie in a glass bottle. Yes ...' She laughed, sipped her cocktail.

Well now, he thought, her voice is even huskier. Among clouds, over Amsterdam, the brown-eyed woman sighed and reached out for his hand.

The Dover-Vienna-Kiev monorail express zoomphed past, high on an unending line of concrete stilts, well over their heads, and above even the green umbrellas of the gnarl-trunked oaktrees. She slowed her run through the park, beckoning Michael, who put his hands on his hips and laughed, as she stepped with an exaggerated daintiness among the yellow daffodils.

She was totally aware; aware of the wind-scrubbed blue sky, the grass being so silvery with moisture, of the quivering of green leaves. Françoise enjoyed being in her body, the cool golden morning, the moist and healthy smells of after rain, for the thunderstorm had laid the dust and the wet soil was fragrant. She stopped, to watch the fluttery wheeling of the blue racing pigeons released from fanciers' lofts.

Ten minutes after that, Françoise paused in her frantic rush down the pedestrian-precinct Jodenbreestraat only to commiserate with the *geist* of Rembrandt, by standing for a moment outside the museum of his fine, seventeenth-century town house. Alas. Poor Yorick——

Off that flower-lined promenade with its throng of ambling tourists was a side avenue with café tables under the elms, and wrought-iron frameworks cradling stone bowls of tulips. She glanced at the plump, stolid Dutch faces that creased over knitting or idly read newspapers, or eyed the newcomers. She sat down, he sat too, and soon Françoise was sipping an English pink gin, and listening to Sanger's monotonously neurotic monologue.

What it amounted to was this: away from his space-crew *gestalt*, the chains of routine suddenly struck off him by her, he felt amorphous, naked, and horribly exposed.

'Look, I have to go back. No way out of it. I'll even be thankful to put on the uniform personality that NASA's psychoprogrammers tailored for me. You get me?'

She morosely scratched along her jaw, squinting up at the clouded-over sun. In him she sensed, through his semi-transparent pretexts, the basic ontological fear of being himself: she was struck, suddenly, by how much he needed green Holland's tattoo of waterways, its antique flavour of the Age of Reason, and those qualities she knew so intimately, its pacificness, its polite beauty.

Sanger sighed vaguely. Françoise, thinking hard, realised

with a tingling shock that she had the power to change his life. She took a gulp of the flavoured spirit.

'Well, everyone knows Holland is famous for its flowers ...' Françoise murmured, blinking twice. She sat there in her new C&A knitted white dress, wearing a bright, absent-minded smile, savouring her own, small intoxication.

'The're nice at Alkmaar, aren't they?' he ventured.

'Why yes,' she cried delightedly, leaning forward. 'I have my boat there.' She clasped his limp hands. 'And, this is a country of gargoyled churches and hoary old painters and antiquerie and canals, don't you know. So will you please come with me?'

Why not? Why not indeed?

Enjoyment grew in Sanger, pleasure from the peaceful motion of Françoise's diesel-powered houseboat. To him it was piquant and strange, with its century-old oak beams with old bargees' initials charred on by red-hot branding irons, and strange to smell its odour of old tarry wood and enamel paint and Calor gas and ... turpentine? During their slow progress pottering up or down a tiled urban canal, he walked down the steep dark staircase and explored.

The first cabin he entered had blue china vases full of fresh green mint: things she had collected littered it. A Persian carpet, some albums of age-browned Victorian photographs, pieces of teak and mother-of-pearl from Ceylon, a child's kaleidoscope, one wall a shelved maze of paperback books and art-history folios.

Nailed above her antique stereogram were brass racks of long outmoded plastic 45s: he picked one up and turned it over curiously between his hands. It was 'An American Trilogy': he slotted it back into place, whistling tunelessly, and passed on into the rug-strewn bedrooms. The one that must be hers was all deep red, and musky with expensive

perfumes. Sanger saw a battered one-eyed teddybear sitting beside the vanity mirror; he picked it up, smiled.

In the toilet were two framed photocopies. One of a cheque for \$144,000, the other of an exceptionally posturing, exceptionally fulsome review from a New York art magazine. It was her. All fresh angles. He smiled, with warm respect, not sentimental regard.

By late afternoon the engine was still throbbing, and they were sitting in the sunlight and gliding picaresquely Rhine-ward. 'It's high water,' she pointed out, glancing quickly back to see if he was giving her his attention. 'We're riding an Alpine spring's melted snow, come via *Mittel-europa*'—she gave a linguist's guttural twist to the German word—'through quiet valleys, green and still, which are overbeetled by stone castles and lipped by fine vineyards.'

Michael Sanger rubbed a knuckle under his nostrils, got up from his deck-chair, and slid awkwardly over the smooth wood, intending to fix himself some lemon barley water in the galley. Under the candy-striped, pole-supported awning tented out from in front of the wheelhouse, beneath the spinning ears of the atmospheric sonar, Françoise sat in a yogic posture, her blue-black hair neatly lacquered, meditatively merging her personality with the great objective world. She was looking at the sky, at how it glimmered with the colourless phosphorescence of dusk.

She felt a chilly sundown wind spring up, and saw it wrinkle the silver, reedy mirror of the canal. Rooks in their high rookery cawed over the light-green meadows, heifers looked up, and Françoise shivered suddenly. Then an insight struck her, and she explored it intuitively, in a visual language.

'Look, Michael!'

'Mmwh?' He looked back, clutching the brass handrail.

'—All things we see prove pure, da Vincian perspective in another dimension——' she waved generously over the ver-

dant, windmill-ornamented polder their waterpath bisected. From the riverside garden of a neat whitewashed cottage, the smallest Dutch girl she had ever seen toddled out from a rosebush and waved back. Françoise smiled, and went on, 'All things were seen dimly, approaching, ambiguous in their very essence. But soon, they are close, have names, are smellable, noisy, *real*.

'Are dwindling, Michael ... Then everything is—gone. You know, this boat makes perspective into a metaphor for Time ...'

Something brushed long slender leaf-green branches at them. It might have been an alder, it might have been a willow: he didn't know.

Again, he said nothing communicable, and again Françoise found his total inwardness distressing. She stood up, nubile in a white bikini and tennis shoes, looked at him. His face was closed, set, blank. So fiercely, she wanted to reach him, somehow, anyhow.

Later in the evening, when they were sitting drinking champagne in her warm, red-leather upholstered cabin, she heard the drumming of the rain and bent with a tray and offered him symbolic hospitality. Spanish oranges, a kettle for fine tea that came all the way from China; then, flushing slightly, she offered him half of her nuptial bed. The response she received was will-less and tepid. So she asked his turned back, 'Well, would you like to visit Karelia? Try some winterish sports?'

Shrugging, tapping at her Victorian barometer, he supposed so.

Tomorrow came. Then they flew by night, north. There, once settled in, they listened to Sibelius, and skied. On the morning of their second day there she began to paint, austere, trim, youthfully slender in her pigment-spattered blue silk kimono. She stood with a palette and brushes be-

fore the snow-flecked windowall, looking out at the immense frozen lake and thinking, Here in this winter Finland, Eternity has metamorphosed into landscape. On her canvas, she began blocking in pure elemental colours: Scandinavia, she thought, my long dead grandmother's birthplace. It's a truly end-of-the-world melancholy here. Like Munch. It's the boreal dissolution I'll paint; here the sky's cleansingly aseptic intellectuality, pale blue, and the rich earth is drowned by a limitless vacant white that shores up the dead heavens . . .

It all combined in her and she expressed it as a huge whorl of Turneresque seeming-chaos, which (if you examined the oils' textures under an acutely angled light, carefully) would be rich with tenuous, immanent white lilies.

It was her symbol for the seed, for that unquenchable inexpressable joy deep in the secret heart even of chaos, that would last until the eventual cold winding-down death of the universe.

After another hour she laid aside her delicate tools and sat down before the roaring wood fire, and began to read a slim volume of the works of the Seville poet Francisco de Rioja's, to refresh her spirit, to drown her growing bitterness in flowers. Then she put on a tape of Palestrina, went into the kitchen, uncorked a demijohn of Dorset cider, sniffed it, then washed and polished dry a pint glass, filled it with the sweet, strong drink and drank.

Later, they were in the dark together, in bed.

'Oh sod you,' he said, pushing at her.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'I just wanted some affection.'

'Leave me alone, will you!'

'I must have affection, Michael,' she said, I must have affection every single day, or I shall die——' She was shrill

with imperious hysteria.

'Don't touch me,' he mumbled, turning his back to her.

'Oh my God!' she cried out in despair. 'Oh my God!'

From him, there came nothing but silence.

Two

So it didn't work out. And things in Paris and Italy were attractive. So, at noon on the Monday, they winged back to France in a jumbo-jet. In the loaned Louis Quinze chateau they stayed at, she smiled, agreed with him; first *Venezia* and *Napoli*, then perhaps the Tagus country, then America, and 'home' again to France. By the following nightfall their monorail train was winding through the highest, still snowy reaches of the Massif Central. An FM station was broadcasting the 'Moonlight Sonata' to them: in the blackness he could see nothing but the red one-eyed glow of her cigarette, hear only his own rather harsh breathing.

She lithely slipped out of her sky-blue leotards and came to him as he sat up, and kissed him hard on the mouth, and stroked his eyelids closed. She slid grinning into his bed. Sanger hugged his arms around her waist, and began to bite at the round curve of her shoulder; and then they made love.

Afterwards they slept, their glowing bodies cradled in one another's arms, and he dreamed of southern cities who invited them to share the tropical sun's ripening warmth.

And later they awoke to the Venetian station and then to the millions of pigeons, to the weathered lions and dogs carved out of stone; blinking at the Renaissance cathedral, the Bridge of Sighs, the Doges' *palazzo*, at everything which clustered in that brackish lagoon. Exhilarated, he opened his senses and turned to the warm morning wind.

then back to the great city.

They worked that first day through in explorations. Françoise had only been there once before, when she was an art student in Paris. But by late afternoon he was alone, watching some orange peel and fresh roses float on the oily water of the grand canal. The air was thick; he could smell vegetables rotting, and meat being cooked. And suddenly, in the pink dusklight, he realised that the sea-wed city was glory and gimcrackery, simultaneously. And night fell.

Sanger was frightened, thinking of the ambivalence; he looked down a lesser waterway through a net of slack washing-lines. Frightened, because he still needed to think of the world as entirely definable, and wholly unambiguous.

But he was already beginning to change. So that later, her visits to the exhibitions in Naples, to that of Dürer on the Wednesday and the Art Nouveau on Thursday, were underlaid only by her nagging worry for him. The micro-books of hers he had begun to read, Laing or William Blake, Sartre or Colin Wilson, seemed to reveal the most chaotic of hungers. Nor would he ever speak about what he was thinking; that hurt her, that he would reveal nothing essential about himself, really. But she was still deeply concerned for him.

That evening, Michael learnt, a German Deutschmark millionaire was throwing a 'small' party in his rented, sixteenth-century *villa rustica*. Françoise said she knew him well, as a man whose diffuse intellectual and artistic leanings conflicted with the spartan upbringing of a strict, old-Prussian line; he had, after a number of failures, for several years contented himself with wide acquaintanceships and a penchant for showing a brittle, self-conscious style.

So he collected certain of his guests from their hotels—

and Françoise was a very old friend—in a huge and glittering silver Hispano-Suiza, his almost silent, leopard-skin upholstered replica of the genuine 'twenties models. His Neapolitan chauffeur, with much courtesy and fuss, deposited Françoise in her red satin gown and her gloomy-faced companion on a gravelled walk, before the flight of stone steps that led up to the great house. Behind the structure's ornate marble façade, a setting sun was veiling blue and orange damask in the frosty-blue sky, and in the vineyards long shadows stretched; electric lights were already burning in some of the easternmost windows.

'Interesting, is it not? Shall we——?' She gestured up the stone staircase.

Inside, beyond a hall floored by pink-veined granite, stood a high domed room ribbed with oak, luxuriantly warm from the vividly glowing sea-coal fire opposite, which crackled and danced beneath a lustrous copper chimney-piece. Sanger watched the elegant-looking people who coolly refrained from even vaguely glancing at Françoise and him. There was Renaissance choral music, gliding out of concealed speakers.

By the punchbowl on its round mahogany table, set back against the reproduction-Cretan fresco, he saw a burnished suit of fancifully wrought armour: she tentatively assigned it as Spanishwork of Philip II's era, as she strolled towards the barricade of people. That damascened masterpiece of armourial art was fitting to the grandeur of the Escorial—or of this place.

He followed her.

Because there were now more than four people within hearing distance, shyness automatically jailed him deep within himself, into brusque introversion. He drifted through a haze of gossip and tobacco smoke to the left-hand wall, as she sauntered away in scarlet, waving and

gaily chatting in half the tongues of Europe: Sanger held on tightly to the violet, rimefrosted balloon of the brandy glass that the blonde, smiling Swiss maid had presented him with. Looking numbly about at people's faces, he realised that everyone was *foreign*, and that depressed him so; these smooth people would smile, and smile, but behind the indifferent politeness were no doubt sinking devastating barbs into his morbidly sensitive ego.

What could he do now?

Then Françoise looked back over her shoulder and noticed his shyness, so she turned back, and deliberately, kindly, linking her bare white arm with his, she introduced him first to Gunther, their pink, massive and bland host, then escorted him to the fireplace and to the lean, saturnine fortyish man leaning on its mantelpiece, Dante Amarino, the Sicilian-born lyric poet who'd once been married to her cousin—and he was witty, but scrupulously cordial—and then he met the six or seven others she felt 'are more than beautiful, silver-tongued losers, or courtesans running with a fantasy "in" crowd ...'

Some talked to him like people who might become friends, offering smiles, drinks, perhaps something rare to smoke.

Sanger swapped drinks at the bar, a half-smile still masking his face, but then some short squat hairy man turned round and eyed him coldly, with 'no use for you' sneering from his bearded, troll-ugly features. Flinching, looking round for social support, Sanger wondered what had gone wrong. And in his own mind, he realised that he really was a social cripple. All right, so his French lady was a fine, appealing and sensitive crutch ... but as a permanent spare wheel was no way to live.

Sanger shifted back to the wall, and huddled against it. Alien people pushed past, laughing too loudly.

But there was a future, though, in his mind's eye, where his occasional flares of brashness had been eroded into a granite self-confidence, and his romantic naiveté had been entirely corrupted into defensive cynicism; when he had mustered enough iron in himself to stare *anyone* down.

'Some day, some day ...' he promised himself, angrily gulping down his gin and tonic, slamming his glass on to a table, walking violently away. At the French windows he stopped, because nausea and aloneness suddenly gripped him: he pressed his forehead against the cool glass and wheezed in air. There was more than this, there was more than this ... A world outside, him behind glass, excluded from the talk.

So, wanting action, drunkenly glaring, he sauntered off to the west down an aisle of deformed glass statuary; at the other end he found two thin men slowly fondling one another, kissing. That was the first time he had seen that love in the flesh.

Next he opened a door. Sitar music twangingly rippled out, but far away down the corridor a pierrot was performing handstands. Again and again, whirlingly colourful in a sudden, utter silence. Finally, someone unseen shut a pair of communicating doors ...

He blinked, and moved on more thoughtfully. This house, he solemnly imagined, must be a little like living inside one of those huge startling canvases by Dali. A life in Technicolor, full of theatrics and ironic juxtapositions. It was far from the way he lived. Vaguely, he wished that there had been more leisure to read, and think, and to travel, by himself and naked to experiences, rather than the endless parade of logical formulae, revised editions of the bulky mimeographed operating manuals, harrowing psych tests, and the camera-cluttered interviews that accompanied his life, *their* life ...

Engineering was only one place to stand. Even if it did

get you to where you could see the rings of Saturn from the inside!

Sighing, he slipped off and went outside.

The stars were very bright, tiny and cold above the courtyard. Windows glowed, the cool night air was scented by flowering shrubs. He sniffed, and thought *mimosa* and *begonia*, then frowned at his ignorance. Mentally shrugging words away, he whistled up a dumb waiter and let it settle on the flagstones, poured out more gin, cut it with tonic water, added ice and a slice of lemon, then walked around one wing of the house, and peered across a vast swimming pool.

At the other side, clustered in the dark around a low diving-board, a knot of gesticulating, shouting people had gathered. Four men with three women. Feeling isolated and oddly rapacious, Sanger leaned out and looked at them: he would lean that way for ever.

Later, beneath a small room's chandelier, Sanger stood with folded arms and listened carefully to an attractive girl in an orange chamois catsuit, who was talking in accented English to a little, plump and smiling Taiwanese, about her master's thesis on the novels of someone called 'Par Lagkervist'.

He ate a canapé, walking away from that really alien conversation. But then, he did not want to sit through 'Citizen Kane' again, nor to socialise further. Actually, he was surprised that his lady had extended her invitation to cover him; because he couldn't quite relate himself, part of the international technocracy, to what he met there, a much more chic but equally cosmopolitan élite. A famous holofilm director and his pet Nigerian actress in her gown of white silk, were posing indolently at a little table. A milling herd of multimedia cultural journalists had assembled around the punchbowl and the small cocktail bar

behind it. Françoise was waved at, because her facility for producing red-hot but wittily controversial epigrams about her artistic rivals or ex-lovers had made her a popular interviewee.

She slipped over, 'Hi Carlos, Jorge, Peter,' collected a teenaged Breton poet, nodded again, and left to introduce the boy to two fashionable neo-Impressionists, then to a young musician, and she in turn was beckoned over by Amarino to meet the one sculptor—gnarled, grey-haired old Fuentes, the Brazilian *Prix de Rome* ...

But, in another flurry, the crowd was gone from around her. Alone again with Françoise, Michael asked, 'What movies have they got?'

She shrugged, staring curiously at a table where four-handed whist was being played. 'I don't know. Gunther's a Fellini freak, though; last time he phoned me I think he said he would be having 'The Satyricon', of course. It'll still be Italian language but I think there'll be sub-titles ...'

'What an accent you've got,' he said, suddenly. 'Very fresh, sweet and nice.'

She smiled up warmly, as they passed the semicircular cocktail bar, and took his hand.

'Not like the way *I* speak,' he added, as an afterthought.

'Try the pear brandy? I can recommend it, because I know our host ...' She waved regally at the glinting rows of bottles.

But Sanger looked out through a doorway, into a smaller, cherrywood-lined room, where there were eighteenth-century musical instruments and paintings on the walls.

'I hope you notice I'm not asking you just how *well* you know him.'

'You are too gracious,' she replied ironically, raising one eyebrow.

Nothing more was said.

There was no way he could oppose her, not in the slightest thing : they both knew that.

She smoked Turkish cigarettes and looked uniquely, radiantly, smugly happy as they explored. She'd even decided to wear a cocktail dress, the scarlet coloured one, slashed clear to her navel; her bosom was white and quite deeply cleft, her hair still that tauntingly indefinable colour, which he thought of as being somewhere between the glossy black of polished ebony and the deepest of sea-blues.

Time unveiled a graceful entertainment, though, coupled with exquisite Latin cuisine and rare vintages; also, they found that one of the many rich ground-floor rooms was filled with the sounds of Bartok and Kodaly, another with classical Indian music, and a third, behind the sonic insulation, with fine old middle-twentieth-century songs, titles like 'Tambourine Man', 'Mr Bo Jangles', and Simon and Garfunkel's 'America'.

She pulled out the long bronze pins from her glossy coiffure of dark hair, and shrugged it freely down her bared shoulders. 'Let's dance,' she said in that last room, her eyes slightly glazed, an aperitif in her hand. For once he took the risk of pleasure, and they twisted quickly and spikily to a hard rock beat, then were languorously sensual, warming each other with flesh, to the delicate jade-like melody and images of a laceratingly sad, haunting Roy Harper song.

A stage gypsy wandered about, and finished up playing his silver flute on the stone steps outside. Someone with a shrill voice gossiped about some Scottish graduate student who'd stormed back to his motor-caravan in a sulk about something or other.

About eleven o'clock he watched while a German girl was stripped, gigglingly smeared with butter; and thrown

into the swimming-pool. Françoise noticed that couples had already begun to pair off subtly and head for the bedrooms, which were upstairs, in another wing of the house presumably.

'Well, this is "fun" and a half!' she said peevishly.

'What a cynic,' he reproved, smiling.

And then a quiet servant told her that their host was, as Françoise said to Michael, 'Interested in a little *tête à tête*, or maybe some sort of troilism, with a poor dauber and quote "her cosmonaut", unquote. So, lead on, someone or other ...'

So they walked through the luxuriously carpeted chambers, and trekked up a dimly lit stairway hung with two or three Botticelli-like paintings of plumply nude and nubile ladies, and the sort of pink Cupids that appeal to retarded pederasts.

They turned left, then right, following the personal secretary's directions. Michael, technically minded, deduced their way through an all-glass airlock, and they stepped into the tropical floweries; they ducked a pair of squawking parakeets and looked wonderingly at the moist orchids, feeling the humid heat. A bulky figure stood at the low wall, gazing out at the night. Standing there beneath the clear black moonlit sky, Sanger smelt perfumes and pollens, and blankly watched his woman glide forward and, as he swiftly turned back, embrace Mann.

At first Gunther sipped his Scotch and blatantly took merely an idle, anthropological interest in the American spaceman; but the effervescent presence of Françoise—who'd kissed his forehead quite demurely, and squeezed his hand in casual politeness, but she was obviously his one-time lover—and all her glib tact and fiery talkativeness eased a sudden, quite deep flowering of cordiality. Because the two men displayed some of their opinions about things, and they agreed with one another.

Slowly, over tumblers of Greek coffee, a fascinating philosophical interface developed, between the brooding, heavy German, chain-smoking Françoise pacing restlessly up and down, and Sanger, sitting gauchely unrelaxed on the edge of a yellow split-cane chair.

'I'm an orphan,' he said, 'that's why they made me into the gestalt, our sort of overmind. From which I had sixteen days' leave: up in less than a week's time. As for what I was, my family background I mean, I just don't know. The rest have no idea either. Affection starved, I guess. And we're affection parsimonious, too, except maybe for one girl.

'But—I don't know, it all seems too easy and *false* to me. Artificial. And that's my right, to look around at things and at people and say, "I don't believe you. I want the truth behind all of this."'

'I think, Herr Sanger, that you are in many ways one of the most contemporary human beings I can recall meeting.'

'No!' Françoise cried out. 'You *can* communicate! You read the poems and look at the pictures and listen to the music, and you accept the love, and it's not all false. Why must we all torture ourselves into loneliness this way?'

'That was in the past.' Gunther, perspiring and sincere, shifted his gaze from the woman to the man. 'Today the pure, true artist is dead. I mean,' he amplified quickly, 'like my alt German poet friend, Mayer.' When he spoke again, his accent had thickened. 'Who does not speak from the heart, except rarely, merely writes out sheafs of what seem to me to be no more than, ah, intellectual-Marxists' catch-phrases. What I see in his genius is the apotheosis of the shibboleth and *le mot juste*.'

Although she had resumed eating, the conversation was being juggled in her mind like flashing, new coins: she looked up. 'Now, I agree! I still remember that succinct

epigram of Friedrich Heer's you showed me once: In the late nineteenth century, it was improper to speak of God in good society ... today, of course, it is improper to speak of anything important in any society!'

She glanced about her, holding a small two-pronged fork, her movements quick with disgust.

Michael straightened, unzipped his collar and said aloud in a very thoughtful voice, 'It's all one thing. It's half anomie, on the personal level. Sociology-wise, that causes ionisation of the selves in the social body ... And the part cause and part symptom is a breakdown in human communicativeness, so that even artists and such do just produce radical forms without content. It's like dumb men shouting in private languages to the deaf ...'

'Artists——': her eyebrows said, '?'

'Nothing personal.'

She looked down, resumed picking among pink lobster-claws and steak mince and a Waldorf salad tasting oddly of country herbs. Usually, she never ate meat: and besides she was a little drunk. 'Well,' she went on, too loudly, 'we do what we can. Some of us use stone; some sculpt words. Einstein carved out his ideas in mathematics. It is my profound belief that our impulse is, well, elemental, although it takes on allotropic forms, if you see what I mean. Only the medium changes, not the messages.'

Gunther snorted. 'But you are all like poets without a shred of faith in the uttered Word: although some of you know the life-lies that scab over our corruption and prettify our agony, you are impotent.' He had been educated on the basis of the great rhetorical classics of Western literature and thought. 'Each artist, or should one say sociotherapist, intuitively knows that this era is Calvary for us all. But there will be no Resurrection, come Easter-tide. No. We are all paupers, except in material possessions,' his hands waved

over his gaudy house, then sank tiredly back into his lap, 'all naked except for the artifacts we own: in our spiritual destitution I foresee only a psychic Potter's Field. Our living is clearly the precursor of our . . . dying.'

'Apocalypse,' Françoise murmured, sotto voce and ironic, then said aloud, '—But I for one will never never choose that death of the heart for myself. I will not hide; I will bear what weights I must, what pains I can. I am sorry I couldn't make you see that, when it was the time of you and me.'

'Yeah,' Michael said quietly, blinking his ocean-coloured eyes, 'I know. I know. The death in life. I've seen documentaries on those oldtime kids drowned in "now", running away from their lives to Marx or the Book of Changes or J. R. R. Tolkien. Jesus, I know it too, the feeling. The Romantics said it as well, those most famous spiritual exiles of all. Things fall apart; mere anarchy is loose upon the face of the world, and we're here, and now, and left to bargain with the devil. We look in the eye of total despair. And I don't know what to do, which way to turn . . .' Music pooled stateliness beneath his words; but both his hands were clenched into fists.

'Death-wish!'

'What?'

'Nothing,' she said, wilting. 'Nothing at all,' she went on, wearily. 'It's just'—with the elegant sweep of one pale hand she indicated the music booming upstairs from the ballroom—'just the *Blue Danube* hell-bent on imitating Niagara.'

She swirled the sweetened cognac in the ultramarine sculpture of her drinking glass, as they talked. She fingered the faceted texture, hefting its three-dimensionality on her palm: recollecting how, so many years ago—before she was twenty and her *Ile St Louis* exhibition, before her artistic career had opened at her fledgling, clumsy, sun-seeking

soar—she had spent seven months in a mews flat in Chelsea, designing jewellery for a progressive fashion house. Sometimes, it seemed to her that a lapidary's attitude to his precious metals and stones had somehow coloured her perceptions of everything.

Françoise stood up then, and moved reluctantly away through the aisles of green and the corridors of McGredy roses and the hydroponics-trays of black Afghanistan poppies. She looked up through a mauve-tinted part of the overroof's glass. When she moved through other colours, she saw the pale, lilac moon was a girandole hallucination, haloed by the diamonds of raindrops. She stopped where the roof did.

Smoothing her fingers over the sleekly polished marble of the balustrade, she peered out over the dim lawns and high hedges and the faintly moonsilvered eyes of the twin boating lakes, out at where the Apennines shrugged up blackly from the moonlit Italy-scape; their silhouetted darkness disgorged sparkling stars.

She sat down on the broad ledge, picked up a silver salt-cellar someone had left, put it down and pressed a flat moist hand to her forehead. Why was she so feverish and tense? She did not know. She hunched up, and remembered Michael: him drinking schnapps; him picking edelweiss by a Swiss mountain-tarn; him brandishing a toasting fork, cheerfully charring bread at the warmly roaring sun of her log fire; him playing clumsy solitaire with her Tarot pack.

Playing the Kama Sutra games, she had rediscovered the salient, symbolic fact that his love-making was insensitive, was ugly. No good. So their Finnish weekend had passed, a listless meandering of minutes and hours. 'Each hour we live in,' she had said hopelessly to him once, 'is a rose unseen, unsmelt. We can make it beautiful to live in, if we choose to.'

And they were unable to close the agonising, haunting

gulf between 'I' and 'Thou', even in the most extreme and mutual moments of love.

From a system of perforated floor-pipes oozed a boiling mist, which became a canvas on which she saw vague, prowling and tortured shapes, which moved like human shades paroled from Hades: and, all alone, she pressed her knuckles into her soft eyes and bent her head, and her hair fell blackly about her, and she began to weep.

'What do you really think of Françoise?'

Gunther's brows creased a moment, and light sparkled from his cocktail glass as he lifted it up and drank. 'She is,' he said in his guttural, carefully enunciated English, 'a sort of saint, but a pretty-pretty, Tennyson-and-water one, very "poetic". She is always trying to control her flood of feeling with her mind, or trying to stimulate her thoughts with her emotionality. She is a most happy person, sometimes; she cultivates joy with the same abstracted pleasure that I cultivate roses. She is like Nietzsche (whom she both deeply admires and sincerely hates) in her belief in the will, but she is very easy to hurt, because she wears her heart on her sleeve out of honesty, and her spirit is an artist's, sensitive and naked. She loves too much to live a comfortable life. I remember once, she ...' Mann broke off, too suddenly. He swallowed the remaining whisky and brutally spat out the remnants of two ice-cubes. Then he faced the foreigner again. 'Herr Sanger, I will say no more. And besides, she is just like us all. She is *all* paradoxes. There are no short-cuts to that sort of deeply human knowledge. D'you want my advice? Then here it is: Find out for yourself. But in the process, cherish her.'

Sanger nodded, his face grave and open, 'Thank you. For this evening too. And ... I think I *will* find out.'

THREE

IT HAD been a divinely decadent experience, she said, as she flew with him to Seville.

There they listened to flamenco guitarists, Françoise and he breakfasted on Irish clover honey and rolls, oysters, oranges and champagne. They spoke much of love. He told her of birds, women and machines, and she about the skin of a summer evening. He leaned over and stroked her belly, and whispered about a pink grotto.

Later she lost her umbrella; that night they bought a pair of Zeiss binoculars from a junk-shop in Madrid, and drove into the mountains to look at a landscape of stars. He had been there. Françoise linked arms with him, nuzzled so that their breath made one frostwhite tongue, pointed up at 'Luna' and demanded to know exactly what it was like, to make love on the Moon.

Because his description was less than charming and not amusing at all, she laughed at all the serious-minded gauche-ness in him, and built up a soliloquy of huge polysyllabic sentences, and with that imaginative prose she praked love up to those charcoal skies, and far beyond.

Sanger looked down from the ledge into the valley, and shivered. Far above the amniotic sea, what else could he taste but dust and swollen thirst? Not even a can of Coke ... Go high enough, man, and you can't see any roads at all, only destinations. He was left all alone with the wind and the mountains, the clear starry sky and her.

'Let's go back,' he said, and awkwardly hand-vaulted over a calm of boulders. Moonshadows filled the goat-track, and a south wind plucked at him.

'Wait!' Françoise called out to him. She came up, to see what the moonlight would reveal of his face. 'There's something in you, and now it isn't joy, it's an ugly thing.

pinched-up with wariness ...'

He turned on her, glaring, holding a long knife-like flake of stone. 'Look, leave me alone! Leave my fears alone. I ... am just a little scared. Space Administration, it's linked to the intelligence and security agencies, and I am under paramilitary discipline, and my leave is up, and now ... now ...' Suddenly he shrugged, tossed his weapon into the gulf, tried to turn away and not see her.

She took his cold hands, hearing a faraway clink of stone, and said, 'Michael, Michael, there is more, don't give up on life. Much more inside you and I. So many worlds to use it on, too. All of space and on the plenteousness of it all ...'

Slowly he smiled, caught her to him, felt her soft strong shape against him and smelt her scented hair. And for a moment, his past life no longer held him beneath its dead, shaping weight.

They flew to Cornwall then, and lived together under romantic pseudonyms in a low and cavernous, oak-panelled Jacobean cottage in a little wood. With their own generator and well, and Tudor roses growing on a wooden frame over their front door. No media-men traced them, and the weather stayed fine. After a week, in the late afternoon, he took her gliding; aloft, he savoured the impossible freedom that always comes on the wings of the wind, and saw fields and roads and walls shrink to motes, to nothingness. He gained height. He falling-leaved, and the fibreglass and her gave little delighted shrieks of horror. Then he went sailing for the beating red heart of the sun ...

But, on the morning of the next day, the tele-fax buzzed and stabbed out a photopaper tongue. Sanger paused in midstep, looked out through big bay windows at fleecy white clouds and green trees. Two tumblers of neat rum were warm in his stomach. Françoise, white gloves in hand,

saw the sheet and his name on the blinking indicator, and left the cosy room. He heard her go, sighed blankly, then walked up to the machine and tore out the plastipaper strip, sat down on the glossy walnut dining table.

And with a sudden fearful, stunning coldness, he was torn by the pain of knowing he must decide, and that this renunciation would hurt, hurt deeply and corruptingly. It wouldn't be a love-letter, junk mail, or anything like that: no. He bent, read it.

A shadow moved in the kitchen doorway. 'What does it say, Michael?'

'It says ... that I have to go back.'

'When?'

'Within forty-eight hours. Or else—"due process of law, official surveillance, and concomitant publicity in the media." Oh Jesus, they threaten you cleverly! That bitch Marinetti——'

She had never seen so much anger in his eyes. 'And? And?'

Sanger's voice was totally controlled. 'And what you'd expect. I'll have to jet off to the Cape or to Houston, before midnight Sunday.'

But she persuaded him to make a final, overnight pilgrimage to France. It was strange, to sit in front of the windowall in the plush airport bar, and mutually recall the bored, ritual politeness of the ambassador's reception, and the funny-tasting vodka; and they chinked glasses and laughed together, over the dead remembrances of that row between them, in the queer, icy morning-after in Stockholm, so long ago.

In Versailles, in the grounds of Louis XIV's palace, they loitered for one final time on a gravelled walk. Lined with neoclassical statuary, it led them up to the huge feather of spray that grew from the naiads or glistening-wet nymphs of a lovely carven fountain. Then Michael, swigging a

Coke, asked her about her ancestry; she frowned at that, and at the itching of her black velvet choker.

Then Françoise impulsively giggled, so that a blue-rinsed elderly Milwaukee matron wearing shellac-edged spectacles raised an eyebrow and made some probably supercilious comment to her companion, another insurance-rich widow. Suddenly the Frenchwoman seized his elbow and ushered him off through darkly flexing tree-shadows, sniffing the odour of burning leaves. They walked past a high green hedge, went along a mossy, stone-flagged path, and he found himself in a secluded bower, screened by trellises of late roses.

She flattened her skirt, and officiously seated herself on the green-painted bench's wrought iron. She smoothed her hair—she was all self-possession, he realised, a passionately adult woman, who would make laughter or tears, and love you or hate you and never ever regret it. And when he sank on to the springy turf and stretched out comfortably beside her, he looked up into eyes that were vividly, coolly amused emeralds.

Cheerfully, rapidly, Françoise pantomimed a fantastic Romantic saga of chivalrous ardour and cynical rebellion, whose characters were out of Chaucer, Scott or Petrarch; she told how the flowers of her Viking-rooted lineage had come to flourish as *noblesse de l'épée*. She tickled his ear with a spear of grass, as she mentioned something about being able to decipher 'the queer pictographs of heraldry'. Kinsmen had ridden with the Conqueror; they lay in gaudy Abbey tombs, far in the West of England. As Knights Templar, with Richard Coeur-de-Lion, they fought to the gates of Jerusalem. Much later, still believing in the Cult of the Five Wounds of Christ, they were with the Holy League and Guise, against the kings of the Valois line.

'Bitter enemies of Philippe "Egalité", who was the Duke of Orleans, then *émigrés* during the Revolutionary Terror,

our German exile was ended only when the Napoleonic edicts opened the lands of France again. So ... my family returned. We still have their letters, impoverished parvenu-haters sharing their burdens of guilt and envy. Though the Restoration partially restored our fortunes, so that the then-current baron, who lies in Avignon, where I shall perhaps escort you in some future year, in his own pseudo-Classical mausoleum, beneath alabaster angels symbolising penitence and a traditional Pietà carved out in Purbeck marble, he, Andre Henri, till his death from syphilis in 1823, was the most violent and vociferous lay spokesman for the clerical, White reaction that occurred under the Bourbon, Charles X.'

'You have a history, I see. A ... past, a name.'

'Everything that was in them I have inherited. Of our Lord then, why, an unnatural son of his was shot by franc-tireurs, while streetfighting during the 1830 Revolution; decades later a nephew was aide-de-camp to Garbetta, during the Franco-Prussian war. A daughter of the house, after being expelled from a Genevan finishing school, became marginally involved with Post-Impressionism (I am glad to say) and the Anarchist movement: later, with her younger daughter, a girl called Christiana, she helped to support exiled British Suffragettes, the Bolshevik Revolution, and Sacco and Vanzetti. Christiana was a very striking personality, and knew Cesare Franck, barely, and later became a friend to Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald.'

Françoise grinned and passed over two generations, 'because they reverted to bourgeois respectability,' she said. Then her own mother, heiress to land and property about Arles and a bloc of fishing and canneries and haulage concerns centred on Marseilles, had suddenly spurned the traditional Anglophobic prejudices of her kind. 'She first became pregnant by, then defiantly married, the ex-Harvard

junior naval attaché at the Embassy, and they more or less eloped to the pineapples and surfing of Gauguinesque Honolulu.'

'I've passed through there. It's a nice place to honeymoon.'

'Doubtless. But their marriage didn't flower. Perhaps Montreal, where we lived, was too unnatural a soil for them. There was very little money, too. Six years afterwards, in 1997, they finally divorced. He went back to Massachusetts, and ... died, in a jet crash. While mother and I came to Arles. I grew up there, and on the coast. I would sail, scuba-dive, take holidays when I took snaps of the wild horses in the Camargue. Sometimes I would camp out with my mother in the Pyrenees; or mama and I might sail down the Rhone to the delta, in our little cabin cruiser. Tomorrow, I'll show my country to you. After all, there'll be sun there.'

'And a Roman amphitheatre?' he asked, thinking hard.

'You know of it? You've been?' she said in surprise.

'No,' Sanger chuckled, 'I just like documentaries on stereo. But, ah, look ... how are things with your life, now?'

'Now that you're going away?' She shrugged, blinked her green eyes once: that was not Gallic irony, he felt sure. She pursed her gilded lips, and he saw a pensive rosebud, cast in pure gold. 'I have my art, of course. Or it has me. If there's a difference.'

She shrugged again, and then they stood up and scrunched away on granite chips, holding each other around the waist.

The family still accepts me. And I have painting as my church, where I worship the only God that means anything to me. The God who's within me. For a year, long ago it seems now, I was married. You did not know that? He was a good and gifted man: I have the two of our children still, my twin daughters.'

Sanger pointed out one view without answering. She saw a tiny summerhouse, and, at the other end of a great aisle of trees, there was a grand prospect over formal gardens, and in awe she glimpsed the palace itself. Then a veiled nun passed them. Sanger stood there, realising that the Mediterranean and her own childhood must be beckoning now; what she was doing he still didn't understand, though. Except—he thought that in some dim way she was trying to baptise him into her culture, her way of life.

So she flew him down to where Marseilles and Lyons are, where the South once produced the bright, poetic gardens of the troubadours' songs, and the medieval code of courtly love.

They checked out of their hotel, hired a Fiat electric-127, and followed the tourist road to the monuments of ancient times. But there were too many vehicles, too many boisterous people. Nevertheless Françoise scampered up one flower-dotted, cyclopean ruin. Uneasily, Sanger mounted the ruined stone staircase too, walking from shadows through blazing sunshine, following her. On mosaic, past walls with carved dog-Latin graffiti, then an OFU-Corse slogan in whitewash ...

Far away a combine harvester puffed diesel smoke and trailed a flock of birds. And in a moment of crippling nausea Michael Sanger suddenly felt his whole personality become fluid and arbitrary. Swaying, he fell back against a lichen-leprous wall: in a spasm of terror he looked down, fearfully down at his own familiar shadow, so that she could not see his face even if she chose to look back ...

Beneath the burnished-copper evening, the grass lisped.
'Françoise?'

She craned back, and her feline delicate face lit up with happiness. She glowed, with that and exertion: holiness had chosen to dwell in her.

'Look,' he went on, firmly, 'I've decided I have to leave. But I want to keep in contact. Trans-Atlantic, it's not such a mad distance.'

'You want to hear from me?'

She approached him closer, closer. But he didn't flinch. She touched him, and he did not move away.

He bit his lip, then sketched out a smile. 'Look—I'm a mess, but don't leave me alone. Not alone like this. Inside my head, see, there's just too much brightness and too many voices ... I don't know what the *rules* are, any more ...' His voice had cracked.

She pressed a single purple flower to her breast and gazed at him proudly. 'The rules of life, Michael? One must create one's own, impose love upon the nothingness. There is no other way to live.'

That was all she had to say.

'Then we'll meet again, Françoise ...'

An hour later he was following his orders to New Houston, Texas, U.S.A.

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